cherry tree

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CARL PHILLIPS

The Days of Invention

Deep in the slumberfall
of fame that—both at first
and over time—has a weight

like snow does, or the way
regret can, once you decide
to believe in it, the lion

lifts its head, to sing a little,
but it cannot sing. Crows
mob the open field, chance

stalks the shaded edges
where the trees begin, where
secrets begin getting careless,

mistakes predictable. The days
of invention, though—which
is really just remembering

more intentionally what we
always knew—are far from
over, says the wind, rippling

here and there at the lion's
mane. A goldenness like
that of a lately restored

ancient coin, the lion's
body, gold the lion's face,
the silence across it,

the mane that surrounds it,
with which the lion
terrifies. Gold is for terror.

JAMES DANIELS

Hiding

1.
Every black boy wanted
to sponge their hair a mountain—
our parents hated it. Our waves
could be dangerous, but at least
these waves wouldn't drown us. They said locs
would trap our beauty—chain our minds
to the bottom of the ocean.

2.
My first college sweetheart
laughed at my hair
on FaceTime: "All that
work for it to look like that?"
When she let go of my roots,
I grew my hair an unstitched rug.

3.
In a crowd still protesting at 12 am,
I decided we did not want to be
seen. The news articles were right;
we wear our hoodies to hide
our faces when we break laws
of physics—when we are magic
-ally making homes of hair and hood.

4.
My students are in detention for masking
their heads. Masks are still
required, but they already know
how to escape this disease: hold
your breath; if your hood's up,
hood off and hands up if asked.
The teachers took my students'
masks and called them sick.

5.
In my seventh job interview,
I strung my locs back
to hide—everyone is hiding
something. These black ropes
hide the way I choke myself.

6.
In my grandmother's garden,
wildflowers and black butterflies
sprout from my head
when I stop believing
that acceptance is oxygen.

7.
I cut them, grandad. You loved
the way they swayed and brushed
my beard. You loved
that some saw swinging chains
while you saw strings of keys. I hope
you know I'll grow them back. I hope
you grow yours up there. I hope
my hood and hair stay locked. I hope
you know I'll tangle myself free.

EMILY HALL

Penalties

At the library, I spend my shifts shooing away the old men who look at porn on the public computers. When I ban them for six months, they just shrug, grab their coats, and walk away. I pull toddlers off shelves, clean up their puke as they sit feverish next to grandparents who scroll through Facebook all day. While working the front desk, I scrape dried fluids from books and tell angry patrons they'll have to pay for the ones they've destroyed. They always look aghast and exclaim, *But I thought everything is free here?*

The library's in the heart of a rural town, some twenty minutes from where I live with my parents. It has faded gray awnings and chipped brick stairs. After I'm hired, the library's director explains that it was once the town's funeral home. She points to the track lighting over the front desk and says it illuminated the caskets during services. The embalming happened in the room where we keep the TV for Family Movie Night. Before I can fully process this, she lowers her voice and confides that the former funeral director, worn out from this work, dropped dead somewhere in the building. She whispers this last part like a condemnation, like I'll always worry if it happened where I'm standing. But whenever I think of this story, as I'm wheeling my cart around the shelves, I instead wonder about how alone he felt.

My position's part-time and pays minimum wage but the town manager still asked during the interview if I was in it for the long haul. I'm finishing up my master's and teaching English at a nearby college, but I said yes anyway because my parents told me to bring home more money. Finding a second job wasn't easy because we're in the throes of the Great Recession, which is why I stay at the library through spring, when the town fires the custodians and has us wash down our bathrooms in exchange for letting us

wear jeans on Fridays. It's why I'm here through summer when we plant flowers that the children who've been left at the library pull up and let wither in the sun. And it's why I'm still here in winter when I attend the town's mandatory holiday party after a full day of teaching and watch as the cops drunkenly grind on their partners under red and green lights.

I only tell myself that I deserve better when one of our patrons, an old man, stands on the library's porch and tries to lure a teenage girl into his car. My coworkers and I chase him away, call the cops, but they fail to catch him, and he saunters back into the library the next day as if none of it ever happened. After this, I start applying to out-of-state PhD programs, using my shifts to work on the materials, because I have to keep all these plans, even the email address I'm using, a secret from my parents. I draft my application essays in stolen snatches of time, between calls with lonely women who need help ordering bus tickets and conversations with embarrassed dads wanting books on puberty. When I forget to upload one of these essays to a university's portal, I write a pleading email to the department secretary while answering a patron's questions about Microsoft Word.

Months later, when the first rejection email arrives, I'm sitting at the front desk's computer. I stifle wild terror as I read it and then watch as two patrons come in. It's a middle-aged couple, a husband and wife I've seen a few times before. The husband's face is stony as he walks past me, and his wife places her books in the return bin before suddenly coming up to my desk. She silently hands me a folded slip of paper. It reads: *Don't say anything. I have late fees on my account. I'll pay with the exact change. Please hurry.*

I look up and she slides sixty cents' worth of nickels towards me. Her brown eyes are wide, unsure if I will follow her directions. But I understand only too well why she's afraid. I clear her account and quietly sweep the change into the white box we keep behind the desk for penalties. When her husband reappears, she stares at me blankly before following him out the door and into the biting March air.

Already, there are more patrons lined up at the front desk, some complaining that it's unfair they can't have more time on the computers. I hear them, but don't respond because I'm still looking out the window, watching as the couple walks back to their car. I imagine chasing after her to give the nickels back. I'd hold her hand and tell her I hoped no one ever made her pay again. And then I'd run past her, her husband, and this whole town's sadness, until the cut of it faded away.

ADRIANNA CAPUTO

After Molly Brodak

I am never
disruptive.
I am most beautiful
at funeral masses;
no one has told me
if this is true.
Mostly, I say nothing.
I have become
the central figure
of silence.
I have the cruelest body
for silence—like fireworks,
I have never held anything
softly, even
raining. Once,
the chapel of my voice
was astounding;
I have baptized myself
to unbecome it.
I am a wonderful girl.

BARBARA DUFFEY

The World Smelled Open Like Anything

I love you and how the house smells
like timothy hay. You know what god does

to those who know god's secrets, they see
the stories happen only to the beautiful.

You and I are not encumbered
by the *conflict-crisis-resolution*,

we're a maelstrom of words birthing words,
a cycle of upset dense as a mustache

among whiskers. We are hat upon hat upon
hat, and the disarray that causes hair.

Hair to keep and hair to pluck is a distinction
of the beautiful, I mean, it tells a story

of whose body is broken most easily, as
an unstarted colt. Me, I choose the hard road

every time, I'm the kind doctors want
to shock with lasers. I pull my chin hairs out

by hand. About my grandmother, I remember
three things: her chin hairs, the time

she told me not to run across a crosswalk,
the time she said, "That's a good question,

Barbara! He doesn't know!" Their house smelled
like apples and paper. She smelled like

apples and urine and fabric stores.
When she died, I got her fabric,

the fabric you asked me to put away
when you came over to help clean my house.

We stashed it in boxes in the "guest room,"
and of course I can't have guests.

There's timothy hay all over the floor.
There are all these heirlooms smelling

of cat urine. But it's not all bad, the way
you stop smelling your own smell, it's good

to smell like someone else sometimes,
or to open the windows and smell like

the world, or, in the dense summer, like
alfalfa hay and the library. You're right,

I remembered more than I thought.
I remembered the summer my sister

jumped off my grandparents' porch
when she was two and I was six.

At the time, I believed in free will.
We crimped the snapdragons, but only

a little. The forestry students came by
to look at my grandfather's hickory pods.

Back then, the world smelled open
as flowers, open like anything.

LUKE JOHNSON

On the 1st anniversary of my father's death, I

sit with my uncle in the half-dark watching

I Love Lucy

and laugh at how

my uncle sucks a cigarillo slow enough

the smoke ringlets

his nostrils

and rises

so the fan which slices them

is suddenly holy

and the flannel coat clutched with father's sweat holy

and the boots

he wore holy

and the abalone ashtray holy

and the hog he shot from fifty yards

and hung on the far wall holy

the warbling lyrics

of night herons holy

I press the smoke slow in my palm and pant

quietly holy

cod on the stovetop: sizzling:

ii.

cod on the stovetop: cold

and my uncle out with a bottle of Boone's

in his lap

and an old mutt licking the wound

on his heel.

I am tempted by the oven flame, the gas

and all its hissing,

how a wolf spider huffs

when caught in a snare

and will eat itself alive. I've swallowed the weather

and wear black to mimic sleeted streets,

the spray from passing tires,

but sometimes, warm,

on a day in August,

when the wind

has fucked the white acacia

and wild onions finger

the fields, I

am asked again if what's in me is holy

if a crater is holy

if the weather shift holy.

And the song

of my mouth

is unmoored.

MICHAEL LEVAN

Helpless

Her parents, visiting, watch him wake and head / to the bedroom to check on his wife. They watch as he guides her / to the bathroom, emesis basin in his left hand, / Zofran and TPN bags in his right, both of hers / holding onto his arm for dear life. They watch her pull / herself along the floor in quick and short shuffles, / an afraid-to-fall child learning to ice skate. They watch him / lead her back to the unlit room; they watch / him pause to get his bearings as she pulls ahead, / dark not hiding anything from her / but her. They watch him jerk / forward, tubing from her leg and arm pulling taut / what's meant to be parabolic, curved, in the shape / of a smile, if that's something people still do. / They watch him watch her / watching her body fail. / They watch him shut doors, / barely not a slam. They watch him mutter / swears when she calls for a cup of ice / or a pill, to answer one of the pump's alarms or her prayers. / They watch him pluck hairs from his cheeks / as he muddles through a seminar paper he asked an extension for. / They watch him pass by bagels / they bought special for the three of them from the only bagel store / in this Southern town, twenty-five minutes away, but why not / spend so much time on the road, trapped as they are / in a house not theirs, in a house where they're only witnesses? / They watch the sun fall slightly later than / at their southwest Michigan home, grateful for light / not pummeled away by Earth's wintered axis or lake-effect snow. / They watch him ask for permission to leave / so he can eat his day's only meal, and they watch him / promise he'll take his phone and come home immediately / if she needs him. They watch their daughter fight / less as the day wears on, even as she gets farther from waking / and closer to sleep. They watch sleep, too, / and what it will bring: another day nearer to a trip home, / another day of his love and weariness, another / day of her living and dead.

CAROLINE WHITE

In his third month of stalking, I consider mythology

The cyclops has returned, one eye
in this cold space of the window. Privacy
was invented in the second century

to get me alone—glass was invented
much later to analyze the symptoms
of what you've trapped. Every night

I am an unused brake pedal, the kind
that doesn't know how to stop things
from spinning. The religious text

predicted this, the coming of
the cyclops to Earth, which I imagined
to involve fiery trees, but it's just

light rain out there, transforming
his hair. It's the floodlights and water
only grazing him because he

is impenetrable, his one eye tracing me
like a wand, pressed against wet
siding. This is the shape of a monster

that loves you, he pounds. If it's true
that the domestic cyclops has a lifespan
of one hundred and fifty years,

then my life fits two or three times
inside his. Then I am one single fold
in all he has watched in the rain.

DOMINIQUE AHKONG

Race Day Ode

If you must refuse a swim cap, take
this baby hair, fraying from this braid.

Take these goggles with mirrored
blue lenses, this anti-fog

spit, this stomach pit, pummeled
valley, this heart drum hide

quivering on the starting block—
On your mark—this lift of hips.

When the horn sounds, take this slap
of stomach, take the jeers—take everything

fictitious—take shame and carry
this stunned belly through this race.

Praise paddled hands, pitch of elbows
bent—swift sips of oxygen—bubbled

outbreath. Dear
rotating axis, dear

blade, call upon the thunder
in your thighs, your muscle-

bottomed flesh: deliver this flame-
fringed body to this plus sign—

to this pool wall again
clapped by two hands.

Motherwort

Moka, Mauritius

They grow like weeds, says the gardener
who lost his wife years ago to a sudden

illness. *Untranslatable*, they say, when I ask
what took her. I think I'm acclimatizing

to uncertainty. I'm learning questions
not to ask. The gardener's name in Sanskrit

means *dark one*, though once when I heard it
voiced at full speed, it sounded like an English word

for *a thing that is not what it is purported to be*.
The way weeds are defined as *wild plants growing*

where they are not wanted. For whom is this true?
The Kreol man who lifts a sack to his shoulder

and walks through Chinatown, calling *ne*,
is considered *malin*, clever, because he's found

the word we use for Chinese motherwort; he knows
the value of weeds. How to feed a family:

Warm a thin film of oil in a saucepan over medium heat
until it shimmers. Add the washed, chopped leaves

and sauté for about a minute. Stir in the beaten eggs.
Add a splash of water and a glug of sweet white wine,

then simmer for five minutes. Serve in soup bowls.
When my aunt brings me cuttings from her garden,

I plant them in an old wine crate filled with soil.
The gardener eyes them as he passes.

After he departs each day, I water them—watch
their lobed leaves thicken and spread.

ERICA DAWSON

Sonnet from thin to thicc

Research shows most patients saw no substantial impact on weight.
–drug manufacturer

I want to call it thicc but it's something more
like swollen, like a tick that's feeding off
a skinny thing until its tiny core,
engorged, its teeth-filled microscopic trough
of a throat sucking, reaches capacity
just as you pick it up and in between
your fingers smashing it and smashing you see
the blood is beautiful. Almost obscene,
this need that isn't hunger. More like wide-
eyed hunting. Do I disregard desire?
I try to live on air. My short tongue dyed
a storm sky's orange. As the winds expire
their hint of rot I know I cannot waste
a second thinking of a thing like taste.

SANTIAGO MÁRQUEZ RAMOS

Broken Willow Sticks

I hold a willow stick in front of me to avoid running into glass doors.

I keep it in my jacket pocket, next to my empty journal, something out of a magician's act. I've had the same one for years now, found it in a muddy creek behind my apartment. It has never broken, somehow. Phones I've owned break more frequently.

I take out the willow stick and hold it in front of me as I approach the diner's open front door. The willow stick doesn't bend and I walk through. Inside, Marion cleans tables and doesn't glance up as I walk in. He never does. I smile at him anyways, wave my willow stick before putting it away. It's an inside joke I have with myself. I tried to explain it to my sister once, but she didn't get it.

I walk to the back and change into a stained apron, fire up the grill. Flames flicker in front of me, warmth wafting up. The beings of light dance around the flames, their faces joyful and musical. Oil hits the grill and sizzles, orders are shouted from behind the counter, and the day begins, like that.

I hum to myself, something mindless and forgotten.

"Rigo!" someone shouts behind me. I was named Rigoberto. It's not a good name.

I turn, barely able to hear over the hiss of frying food and the stench of oil. Mark the Manager stares at me, holding an uneaten plate of food. Eggs and sausage, runny and tender. "You got the order wrong."

I smile at him, all teeth. I take the plate and turn back to the grill.

He mutters a word under his breath. Something kids used to call me, something they'd rhyme with my name. There's a story there, but it eludes me.

The smells of meat and oil float in the air. The grill sputters oppressive

warmth. Beads of sweat pool on my lip. The chatter and laughter of people from the diner ride the breeze.

I say nothing, and Mark the Manager leaves.

My reflection on the grill's shiny metal hood smiles back at me.

It's dark when I walk home.

The smell of grease lingers on my skin, the smell of sweat, of a day of work. The fall breeze feels cool against my skin, like the whisper of a hug. It makes me want to rip my skin off. Become shadow, flutter to the moon.

One foot in front of the other. Mostly empty streets, intersections upon intersections, tinted streetlights and colorful stoplights and slow cars illuminating the path. A couple passes by, hand in hand and full of laughter. Nights like this remind me of the quiet emptiness of my family.

My hand rummages in my jacket pocket, fishes out a pair of glasses. They're round and old and hug my face closely. They don't have any prescription.

I cup my hands around my mouth and blow hot air up toward the glasses. They fog, and the city around me becomes a swirling blur. Only the lights shine through the artificial haze, becoming spheres of refractory glow. Piercing and beautiful.

I spread my arms and walk, one foot in front of the other, looking up. Street lights become glowing suns, stop lights become globes of red or yellow or green. I imagine the beings of light, conjured by the night, bodies ethereal and untouchable dancing around the spheres. They come from a place where nothing happens and nothing goes wrong. Somewhere where things just are.

A voice at my side interrupts the show of colors. "You see them too," it says.

I turn. There's a small shadow next to me, slumped on the ground. I frown at it through the fog, willing it to reveal itself.

My glasses defog, the veil lifts slowly. A man sits on the side of the

street. He's covered in blankets as if it was the depth of winter. He looks up at me, only seriousness in his eyes.

"See who?" I ask.

The man grins with the secrets of the universe. "The governments, their agents," he whispers. "They're everywhere, hiding."

I feel the urge to look around but I know I don't have to. I shrug. Who am I to say who sees what?

The man nods to himself, assured. There's a smudged sign by him, stepped on and illegible. Another couple passes by, throwing a takeout box into the trash. I think of all the leftover food we throw away at the restaurant.

"I'm Melvin," he says.

"Rigo."

His voice drops octaves, becomes crashing waves. "There's a war going on, Rigo."

There's always a war going on. I nod.

Emotion bubbles up, froth on the sea of his voice. "I'm afraid all sides are going to lose this time."

There are things I could say to that. I don't.

"I hope they take care of us," he says, and pulls the blankets to his nose.

I'm not sure who he's referring to. Not the governments from earlier. Maybe the beings of light. They've never protected me before though.

"I hope so too," I say. He's asleep already. I'm not sure if he heard me.

I drop all the change in my pocket — almost $20 in scattered tips — by his side, and walk away. I cup my hands and fog my glasses again, marveling at the spheres of broken light. I try to will the beings into existence, ask them to whisper their secrets to me again, for it to make sense. Lights click and change, cars pass me by. I let my arms fly at my sides.

Sometimes I wonder if I'll run into a truck while walking, looking only at spheres of light, looking for those elusive beings.

Home is a small apartment, dim lighting, the smell of river and earth. At the entrance, a stack of unopened mail. Since I moved to this country, I've only received mail from banks and Internet providers and department stores. They all want something from me. They all promise me riches and friendship.

I've applied for 17 pre-approved cards and got denied every time. They want something from me, but they don't want me, it seems. The stack of letters falls, each one a dead tree reminding me that the world has things that it doesn't want me to have.

I ambulate to the kitchen. Piles of journals sit on the uneven wooden table. Stories I've written, or tried to write, or imagined myself writing. Entries from days that I wanted to erase from my mind, and now only exist in ink and sourness. I take out the willow stick and place it on the table, with careful reverence.

The phone rings. I drop off my bag and jacket as it moans and screams, go to the bathroom and wash my hands as it complains and rattles. I walk back to the kitchen and pick it up, twirling the cable around my finger.

A small voice speaks from the phone. "Rigo?"

Only one person calls me on the phone, other than scammers and spammers. Only one person does not let the phone stop ringing as I do everything else except answer, until I do. My sister, thousands of kilometers away, in my hand and ear.

"Hola Juana," I say.

Her voice reaches to the sky, lifted by warmth and air. "Tanto tiempo, Rigo," she says, "¿Cómo te trata America?" She pronounces it "uh-mer-i-cuh," hard and choppy.

I shrug into the phone. She laughs, knowing my response.

"Man of many words, my brother," she says, accent made of fresh sap. She's insisted on practicing her English with me ever since I moved here. "Which is funny (pronounced "foni") because you have a thousand words in a thousand journals."

I glance at the journals. The only possessions I've carried with me, throughout all my travels.

"My brain thinks better when I write."

"Well you have to send your stories to us soon," she says. "Remember when we were kids, we used to sneak behind the house and climb up the big tree—the one mamá would say was the hair of a buried god—and inside the branches you would tell me stories for hours. About princesses and monsters and magic and bravery. Until the sky went dark and they had to drag us down for dinner."

I smile at the phone, catching my reflection in the hallway mirror. Behind me, a glow. There's a being of light in the kitchen with me. "I remember," I say.

"Eran los buenos tiempos," she says. "Todo tiene más sentido de pequeños." I hear her shake her head. "But anyway. I can't wait for you to share those stories with the world. You'll be a famous writer. I know it."

I don't lie to her. I don't tell her the truth. I say nothing, pretend to agree.

She sighs, and the weight of age pushes down on the space around us. There's quiet, from the phone and my apartment. I can only hear the ticking of the clock here, her soft breathing there. I don't say what I want to say.

She sighs again. "Papá está malo. He cannot get out of bed anymore."

My finger winds the phone cable around itself, tightening it.

I know she notices my silence, a different kind of silence, the negative space of it.

"He wants you to come home...." Her voice trails off, and I don't replace it. "You know. I think he wants to give you the farm."

My finger starts going purple.

"I don't want it," I say.

"I know," she whispers. "But I do hope you come home someday."

I look at the pile of journals, the pile of mail. Equally useless.

"I will." It is and isn't a lie. "Te quiero."

Juana hangs up, and I'm left with the cord and the phone and the journals and the trash and the quiet.

The light flickers above me, and I look up. There's a being of light in my kitchen. There's no expression on its face, there's no face. But it tells me everything will be okay.

Dawn happens, that slow unfurling.

My breathless rise from slumber happens.

Getting ready for a day I don't want and am stuck with happens.

Walking to work in a loud, dead city happens.

Checking for the door trying to trick me happens.

A blessing of fire from the beings of light happens, their small endless dance.

Cooking happens. The heat and grime and grease.

A day passes, full of nothing, like that.

I clean my stove and workstation. There's chatter coming from the seating room. Not client chatter, we closed already. The other restaurant staff, my coworkers, gather around a mix of tables, eating and drinking. Some special gathering. I intentionally made extra fries today, so some would be left over, so they would have more for themselves. Their chatter and laughter and drinking continue. I clean and think of stories that will never come to be.

Night happens.

I exchange my apron for my jacket, the willow stick nestled inside. I walk toward the open glass door at the entrance of the diner, an untainted breeze cooling the diner. Mark the Manager, Marion, and two waiters sit across two tables pushed together. Beer and food and cards lay scattered on them. A sour smell hangs in the air.

I smile at them as I pass, say nothing.

A voice rises behind me. "You're not gonna have a beer with us?"

It's Mark the Manager. The others fall silent, witnessing. I don't turn. A smile forms on my lips. I step forward toward the door.

"Don't walk away from me, you fuck," he says, like a caress. It's all jovial.

I turn now, smiling, mouth full of teeth. I see my father's face superimposed on his. Beings of light dance around the manager and my dad's faces, looking at me, before vanishing.

"What, you're too good for us?" they both say. In English and Spanish and every other language at once.

I think about the willow stick in my jacket. I think about breaking it against something, but instead I shake my head, appeaseful. My head jerks to the side, indicating something. Somewhere I have to be.

Mark the Manager stares at me for a moment, contemplating his next words. If he's capable of that. Marion avoids looking up, eyes and hands playing with a fry.

Mark the Manager smiles. Heavy hand grabs a fist full of cold fries, choking them. Oil runs down. "You made them, after all."

He flicks his wrist, and fries fly. One hits me in the chin with a muted, moist thud. A couple bounce against my jacket, leaving little traces of salt behind. Most land on the floor.

Mark the Manager laughs and grins and shakes his head. He sits down, grabbing another beer.

I look down at myself for a second. I look at the floor. I look everywhere but at them. I turn to leave, pull out the willow stick from my jacket and hold it in front of me as I pass through the open door. My hands tremble slightly. The stick doesn't bend and I pass through, into the crisp night.

I hear more laughter behind me. I can feel the pointing. The snickers. I can feel the memories they bring behind my eyes.

Once, when I was a kid, I ran into the sliding glass door of our house. I thought I had seen something beautiful outside, something beautiful and

made of light calling to me. Instead I bounced against glass and the being of light vanished. My dad laughed. The dog barked. When I started crying, my dad hit me and told me to clean the smudge I left.

I fog my glasses and the beings of light dance everywhere and nowhere at once.

I don't answer the ringing phone.

I stare at the journals—the uncompleted stories, the forgotten dreams—in the empty silence of my home.

They told me in a writing class, once, that stories without a plot have to be angry or sad. That's how my life has felt, all my life. Plotless. Angry and sad.

The beings of light look down upon me from the ceiling's ember glow. They cannot touch me. They cannot help me. I see them and imagine being lifted with them, taken to somewhere better. I used to beg for them to do so. They didn't. They've only ever looked down and smiled.

I return to work the next day.

I don't have much of a choice. Between paying rent and sending back money to my sister and her family, well. Life continues. There is no resolution. Sometimes stories don't make sense.

I enter the diner, willow stick in hand. Hand trembling and eyes down, like an animal that hears a sound of metal on metal in the wild.

It's earlier than usual and the diner is still, near empty. It smells of residue and promise. Of cleaning products. Marion is cleaning tables again as I walk through.

He looks up this time. I smile and wave with my willow stick, pretending to not care.

Marion stares at me for an eternity. He nods and grunts at me. I grunt back. It's the most we've ever said to each other.

He returns to cleaning tables. I place my willow stick in my jacket and go to the kitchen. I change, light up the stove. Beings of light, their bodies small and made of energy and soul, dance around the stove's flame.

I think of my sister, behind the plastic of a phone. The most important person in my life, the one I keep farthest away.

I think of the pile of journals and incomplete stories. The shame of a dream lost.

I think of the beings of light, ethereal and unknown, witnessing my plotless life.

Oil hits the grill, orders are shouted from behind the counter, and another day begins, like that.

K.A. HAYS

A Few Things Worth Noting in the Quality Inn off the Highway Near Baltimore

for Joshua Garcia

Out the second-story window below room 333,
a red shopping cart's parked by the curb.
Each cup in this room is wrapped
& set on its lip. My time of conscious life
will last a specific number of days,
an intriguing limit, like the line of the yellow curb
against the pavement worn with frost heaves.

That red shopping cart rests on its wheels,
open vivid particular,
a particularity I felt this morning at home

when I slid a magic eraser in the toilet bowl,
wet hairs gliding over porcelain,
dragged by my hand, the scrubber

yellowing with wiped piss,
thinking how these hairs fell from bodies,
from people I love who grow & shed hairs,

my hairs too. I was wiping away
water that had entered the ground as rain
& sped through pipes into a particular cup

through particular lips down a throat
into a stomach out a urethra
to splatter over this bowl that flushes waters

back to the ground, & when my time of conscious life
reaches its last second, the waters that feed
what I call me will feed something else,

/ the cup I called my being will be
turned over. The elements
will be ready for new use.

The streetlights switch on,
& I see it's been raining—
shine of curb & lot,
stripe of grass between, the dirt drinking,
evening & it's been raining soft rain
all this time. The red shopping cart darkens
in rain. Darkens softly & shines.

THEODORA ZIOLKOWSKI

Pink Mold

All winter, the possum swaggers across the porch, glassy-eyed
as a drunkard, oblivious to our cats who view his performance
from behind the sliding glass door, which is one among many whose dull
locks don't work. So we install chains & bolts, store the keys in a pink
teacup though they disappear of their own accord.
In that historic house, I come to understand desire
as the condition of looking into a blue sky
without sun. All summer, the softwoods & their balsamic pong
of cedar. Mold thrives behind the fridge &, in the master bath, smothers
the walls in which a family of squirrels live.
By summer, cabinets slop off their hinges & the kitchen sink craters the floor.
Desire can make one senseless; I defended that house to the bones.

JENNY JOHNSON

Daddy Scene

He'd cruised me
in a way I'd walled
myself off from.
Hunter-green hanky

hanging out
the right side of his jock.
All we'd agreed to
at first was a spanking

in the nook
of the basement maze.
He could've been
my senior. Handsome

worry lines. A fade
fine as sandpaper
under my thumb.
He said so little,

but when he
shared his joy
in gagging
I provided. Some sex

makes us gentler,
        a pissing contest
wrung out
        in reverse,

a blurry field of
        seeds released
without aim
        or projection–

meadow of
        meadowsweets,
of daisy fleabanes,
        of sprouting stems

unrecognizable
        and then. And then
I grew into
        the daddy

he saw in me.
        Against the wall,
when his eye
        twitched, I clutched

his jaw. Against
        the stone,
his rabbit softness made my
        silver quiver.

JEFF EWING

Paradox Lost

It's Halloween, and nothing that's meant to scare us does. We're a little old for it all, at an age where we can see, for the most part, behind the curtain. The chainsaws without chains, the coffins popping open on lawns, all the screams and music and sound effects are props meant to teach us that we never really were in any danger. It's all just a show. We pass a joint around the car and laugh, all the bogeymen become clowns. The police lights behind us, whirling blue and red against the trees, are merely festive. We roll laughingly on, elbows perched on the doorframes, extras slipping behind the scenes. A quick blast of siren finally rouses us, we douse the joint and wave our arms toward the open windows to clear the air.

In the back seat, Charlie fidgets. Beside him the rabbit bounces and mutters, his ears folded double against the roof, small bands of sclera shifting and shivering deep in the eyeholes. The costume's a full-on suit, one piece up to the neck, lucky size fifteen feet included. The head is removable, I think, though I haven't seen it off. The fabric buck teeth flutter with his labored breathing, in and out, whistling. He says something I can't make out. I wonder briefly if he's one of Mike's brothers, but he doesn't fit the mold. He's too nervous, too uneasy in this situation. The Johnsons don't rattle.

There are ten of them in all, the Johnsons. Mike's about a third of the way down the family ladder. David's the oldest and was the first to move out of their neighborhood—a warren of mazed streets intentionally designed to disorient outsiders—to the compensatory downtown grid of numbered streets and lettered avenues quaintly mimicking Manhattan. The party's at his place, a little out of our normal orbit. We mill around among the older crowd for a while, tipping our masks up to sip warm Lucky Lagers, but we're too antsy and

young to linger. We want movement. We leave David and his friends standing on the porch, so easy in the night air, their futures in our minds already carved out and lived. History.

A current that snakes through the valley in one long breath carries us forward in our blessed unformed shells, windows down, the fall air carrying a hint of rain. Leaves shuffle along the gutters as the green sprawl of a one-block park slides past, a pump station like a mausoleum anchored at its center. We have no idea where we're headed, rattling like shaken ball bearings across the flat country we call home. A row of oaks along the edge of the park dip their branches toward us, the lowest skimming the roof with the screech of fingernails. We're in no hurry, just driving.

Then the siren, the air-clearing. Mike pulls over without a trace of worry.

The park is lush under the slice of moon rising over the houses on the other side of the street. There are pumpkins on some of the porches, a few lights and decorations strung around the yards. A TV in one window glows blue. I wonder briefly whether the cop's uniform is a costume too. I almost compliment him on its authenticity.

"Out of the car," he says at Mike's window.

There's long hair on me and Charlie, Mike's is full and curly, almost a 'fro. All three of us are skinny, muscle and fat just starting to stick.

"What's going on?" Mike says.

"Out of the car."

Mike's in a cowboy outfit, probably one of his little brothers'. A red hat with a twisted chin strap rides on the very top of his head. The vest is so small it forces his arms up and out to his sides. The plastic six shooter at his waist glints in its cardboard holster.

"Drop the gun belt," we hear the cop say. "Slowly."

He's taken a step back, one hand on the butt of his far more realistic pistol. Mike laughs, then complies. The rabbit leans forward, both hands gripping the seat back.

"Now step away," the cop says.

The rabbit's jaw is working, the way a real rabbit's might on a tough carrot. His foot thumps the floor.

"He's not drunk," I say.

The rabbit doesn't seem to hear me.

I don't know how far we've come from David's house. A minute ago I could see it out the back window, David and a couple of friends watching from the railing, but now it's just us, no visible life aside from the single TV, no outsiders intruding on our little diorama. Mike and the cop, Charlie and the rabbit and me.

"Somebody crack a window," Charlie says, his hands pressing deep into the seat on either side, eyes straight ahead. He's thinking that maybe none of this will involve him if he just sits tight. He worries more than he should, but with some reason. He comes from a political family, and he's afraid any minor scrape of his might snowball into their Chappaquiddick. He imagines his ignominy bleeding into their lives, spilling across the floor of the capitol to stain their shoes like cheap wine.

Out on the street, Mike's hat has fallen back, the chin strap tight around his throat. It vibrates as he runs through the alphabet, then again in reverse. Heel to toe he passes the window, straight and unwobbling. This is old hat, for me and Mike anyway. Over the past three months we've been pulled over almost a dozen times, either separately or together. It's become a game. The police have their tricks (false kindness, feigned discoveries) and we have ours (pipes and papers handed off, pockets emptied in vacant lots). It's not a big town yet, and the trigger-happy days of police militarization are some years off. The risk is low. Had seemed that way, anyway, through most of the summer. But Mike's eighteen now.

"He fell over," I say.

Charlie kicks the seat.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" he says, as the back door opens with a whoosh. We both turn to catch the white blur of the rabbit sprinting off into the park. Not hopping or loping, but running, balls out, kicking up clumps of grass, cottoned legs swishing madly into the night. Off through the oaks, past the brick restroom, the memorial bench, smaller and smaller, a mirage fading back to wherever it came from.

"Look at him go," I say.

Somewhere to the west a tortoise sets out and Zeno whispers from the playground shadows that before the rabbit can catch him he'll have to get halfway there, and before that a quarter of the way. Earlier still an eighth, a sixteenth….According to Mr. Berkowitz, our math teacher, that's Zeno's gist—that the one will never overtake the other, there's really no point in even starting out. It's Mr. Berkowitz's point, certainly, and the school's, if not Zeno's. It's in their interest that we're powerless, stuck at the starting line. What it means at that moment, though, to us under the wash of the Mars lights, is that whatever's coming, it will never reach us.

Charlie leans across and pulls the door closed.

It's nonsense, of course, just a numbers trick. Tomorrow is always just that far off.

The cop cuffs Mike and puts him in the back of the squad car. Tapping his baton against his leg to some internal martial music, he comes back and tells me and Charlie to get out. He gives the car a once-over, comes out with a small baggie of pills. Whites, I can tell. None of us is much for pills, so we assume he's planted them. I do anyway. He takes the keys out of the ignition and dangles them in front of us.

"Who wants to drive?" he says.

I picture the immediate future—moving to the driver's seat, pulling away from the curb, lights and siren behind me, another failed test and thrown in the back with Mike. Then the keys dangled like a rusty lure for Charlie, and it all plays out again. How dumb do you think we are, I want to ask, and immediately answer my own question.

"I will," I say.

The cop drops the keys into my palm, I start the car and pull out. I steal a look at Mike in the squad car, tipping his tiny cowboy hat as we pass. I wait for the hammer to fall, but it doesn't fall, we roll unimpeded out from under the tress into the night that's gone quiet again, just the hiss of the wind sweeping down the street ahead of us and the rattle of a rope against the park's flagpole. Jack-o-lanterns flicker on stoops, a couple of kids in costume turn down an alley. Back at the party someone asks after the rabbit, while out in the cemeteries at either end of town luck-pushers crack open their bottles.

I take Charlie home, turn back around to pick Mike up at the city jail. I wait a couple of hours with the wives and kids of the apprehended, remembering not so long ago when it was only eggs and lousy candy we had to worry about. Cigarettes are still allowed inside. The plastic ashtrays overflow, smoke hangs in a low fog beneath the tube lights. Eventually, Mike emerges with a notice to appear and we head back out to the suburbs. It's Sunday now. The good Catholics of the neighborhood, the Johnsons definitely among them, will be rising soon to dress and head over to Saint Ignatius.

"What was with the rabbit?" I say.

"Beats me," Mike says.

"You know who he was?"

"No idea."

As we leave downtown behind, the streetlights thin, then are gone. The sidewalks too. There are empty stretches of weedy brush, oaks off by themselves. The horizon rises up toward the mountains, flattens out again on the other side. Desert as far as you can see. I'm desperate to get out there, into a

world that has to be bigger than our arm's-width valley. I'm tempted to keep driving, but it's Mike's car and we don't have that kind of freedom. He drops me at my parents' house. I look at the walkway leading down to the front door, past the stubby palm tree and the pyracantha gone wild. It stretches out forever, thanks to Zeno, the distance shrinking and shrinking but never reaching zero. The house slumps under onetime saplings that tower over it, I get old, my parents die. Other kids move in and grow up waiting for the good times and trouble to come for them. They put on their costumes, collect their candy. They rise early in the morning, the faintest light showing beyond the back fence, looking for something wild to cross their paths, even if all the coyotes, the deer and the foxes—the rabbits too—have left with the open spaces and lit out for the hills.

"He was real, though," I say. "Right?"

"We weren't that fucked up."

Mike has a court date ahead of him, but we're both too tired to talk about that. Later on I'll imagine the rabbit on the stand, admitting what I come to realize too late—that while we were watching Mike pace the curb, he'd tucked a baggie into the seat gap and sprinted off into his unsullied future, leaving Mike in the lurch and me in the driveway of the house I grew up in with an itch I don't know how to scratch.

MATTHEW GELLMAN

The Epistolary

We faced each other in the booth
at the diner, trying not to touch.

Turning toward the snow and the highway,
then back, his face was a lit globe.

We were spiteful with each other,
I realize, our childhoods' black bile,

but the dreams have been generous lately;
they don't tug as hard on my leash.

I'm not sure when it became easier
to talk about him than to him,

these words just pebbles I drop in a current:
I don't know where to put him—*you*—down.

You reached for a cigarette:
Lucky Strikes. A collector's item now.

You kept the pack in your jacket pocket,
the red bull's-eye above your heart.

ALYSSA JEWELL

On Pee-wee Herman's Los Feliz Home Listed for Sale Ten Months After His Death

The word of the day is *empty*. Empty the Mid-Century Modern,
the very century of origin: mine, maybe yours, a collective ticking away
under the nuclear clock in the age of every person edging out the next.
Empty, too, the house where we lived in multigenerational solitude:
thick honey in the fields, static on the radio and television then,
a loquacious chair the color of the sea enchanting us all back to life
through the snows and rainbow glitter of a poor network connection.
I loved it so much, I *did* marry it: existing, that is, in linear time,
fully absorbed in the spaces I would later grieve. How a house
can glue into the gaps between your digits and then to your very essence
with all the smoke and proclamation of Grace Jones emerging
in metallic holiday shine from a too small-box: a voice, a body
that could never be contained. We break forth with energy
into the next reveal, ask ourselves what to take along for the ride.
Before leaving home for good, I hold the stair railing, of all things,
as if I were holding the hand of a friend for the last time. I want
my very own green oracle to materialize. I want the gold slabs
of earth bending outside the door to tell me what remains.

WILLIAM WARD BUTLER

You are Beautiful and I am Leaving

After Frank O'Hara

There's a miniature steam train for children in the park, I can
hear it over the low, perennial hum of beach traffic
each weekend—I'll never finish *Ulysses*, but there was an
old word in it, from the Greek, for sealike things: *thalassian*,
don't you love it when I find something new to fixate
on; everything either is or isn't irony and, because it's
rare to receive sentimentality without suspicion, the
easiest thing to do is not to say a word to anyone at all.

Besides Hegelian dialectics there's little else that confuses me,
utterly, like the urge to possess all understanding, or to force
symmetry at times when symmetry is gaudy and unnatural;
secretly, and not so secretly, I have wanted an impossible
experience of living that mirrors the feeling of archival
light—actors speaking in low tones, gaffers out of frame,
last words before the celluloid sparks, flames like insolent stars.

Chastity

There's the act itself and its fantasy;
a falling star in the periphery.
I met a man with a flawless body:

he said maintaining his form
was torture, how good fortune
is murderous; getting what you want,

ruining—once you have it, you can lose it.
I met a man who would pay to be told
he was worthless; it was music for him,

the illusion of giving up control.
He wanted to be tormented, admitted
this to himself after a surgeon's scalpel

botched his aortic valve.
Live how you will;
if it hurts someone else,

how can you be sure—
any pain, sufficiently acute,
is indistinguishable from pleasure.

Saint Teresa of Ávila, stabbed in the heart
by an angel with a spear of gold,
finally felt God's love completely;

it happened once, then never again.

DENISE TOLAN

About the Moon

In the evenings, when the dishes are done and my husband and son occupied, I call my mother.

"Walk?" I say, the second she answers the phone.

"Andiamo," she replies.

I yell to my boys that I am going for a walk and hear a round of goodbyes in return. We accept family patterns like the rules of an old board game by now.

I drive a mile and a half to my parents' driveway. My mother is waiting for me on the front porch. Her yellow housedress is even brighter beneath the porch light. She looks up for a second, then continues lacing her white sneakers.

I shut my car door, and my mother is suddenly on alert, examining me with the same critical eye she used as a dress maker examining seams. I resist running my hands through my hair and try to remember if my hair is behaving today or if it has surrendered to the humidity. But it's not my hair my mother is interested in.

"Why do you always wear such big shorts?" she asks instead.

"We're walking, Mom. These shorts are old and comfy, and I'll just be sweating in them anyway. Why do you always have to comment on my clothes."

"You look better when you wear things that fit," she says. "Big shorts make you look bigger."

"Can we just start walking? It'll be dark soon enough so you can just wait until then and pretend you're walking with a pretty daughter."

"Oh you," she says. Her Italian accent brushes my ear like a favorite

song. "So dramatic. I'm just being honest. You are too sensitive. Who will tell you these things if not for me?"

"Uh, no one," I say, and my answer is lost on her.

Soon we are out of the cul-de-sac and walking toward the lake at the entrance of our neighborhood. As we pass each familiar house along the way, my mother stops looking at my shorts and begins to tell me today's neighborhood news.

"You know Len," she says, pointing her chin at a house where an etched-in-glass map of the world serves as the top half of the front door. I can picture Len, slim with a gray crew cut and eyes the color of faded jeans. He is a pilot who moved into this house when I was fourteen. Len is not married, has never been married, and every woman on the street makes sure he is cared for.

"He has cancer," my mother whispers.

"Oh no." I feel a twinge in my stomach. Every time I see Len he shakes his head as if I were a wonder in the world. "Old enough to have your own child now," he says to me as if I might be a magic trick. "I hope I live long enough to meet your grandchildren," he adds, pointing his folded hands to the sky. Now he has cancer.

"Len says he has good doctors and things will be fine, but some of the neighbors are putting together a list so we can bring him dinners while he's recovering. He's alone, you know. I'm making lasagna next week. His surgery is Monday."

"What can I do?"

"There's a list for mowing his yard. You want to sign up for that?"

"Yes," I say. "Sign me up, Mom."

She nods.

We run out of news and houses as we reach the green area around the lake and begin our walk back to the house. My mother uses the turn, as always, to begin talking about my sister, Augie. If the neighborhood news is new news, the topic of my sister is always the same. My mother recites, like she is reading

from an old recipe, the many ways in which the world has screwed my sister over: Augie has bad luck; she never catches a break; the world is hard for a single mother with three kids.

I say nothing, but in my head I silently review my own list: Augie parties too much, leaves her kids with weird people, does too many drugs. I sometimes feel I'm on the edge of stepping into territory where I might mouth off, but I usually never do.

What I want to say to my mom is can we not talk about Augie for once? Can we talk about me instead? And not about my shorts or my hair, but me. Can we itemize all the ways I've done right so my mom never has to worry about me or blame the world for my bad luck or try so hard to diminish my bad choices? I don't party, don't do drugs, don't leave my children with strangers. I made a good choice to marry a wonderful man. I cook dinner every night, change the sheets regularly, and spend time with my mother.

"Your poor sister," my mother goes on. "It's hard to work on your feet all day, then go home to your children and do everything on your own."

It's dark now, so I feel free to roll my eyes. On her own? My sister does nothing on her own. My mother drives thirty miles to my sister's house every Saturday morning. There, my mother does her grocery shopping, cooks meals for the week (which are never eaten), changes the sheets on all the beds, washes towels and underwear and cleans the house from top to bottom. She leaves, exhausted, to come home and do it all again for her mother and my father. At eighty-eight years of age, my mother's mother, my nona, moved from Italy to the United States to live out the rest of her years with my parents. On Saturdays, when my mother is taking care of my sister's life, I am at my mother's house cooking lunch for my father and my nona.

We all help my sister, I want to scream at my mother, and what do we get in return? Complaints. My sister tells me she resents how my mother begs her children for information about who my sister is seeing. Augie says she knows my mom rifles through her dresser drawers looking for drugs and she

gets pissed when she thinks my mother sneaks in and throws away baggies of anything.

"I had a baggie filled with Tylenol," my sister says. "I lost the top to the bottle so I put them in a baggie. Gone."

I never bother to ask Augie why she hid Tylenol in her drawers or ask my mother why she works so hard to counter my sister's "bad luck."

We are close to turning down her street when I finally snap. "We've been walking for an hour, Mom. You've talked about Augie for most of our walk. As usual. Are you even going to ask about me? My family?"

"What should I ask?" she says. I hear the surprise in her voice, like someone has overcharged her for an item. "Wouldn't you tell me if anything was wrong? I see you every day. Everything is always fine. I thank God every single day that you aren't like your sister. You are the lucky one. Ricordati che."

I walk a little faster. The lucky one? I earn my luck and I want credit for doing all the right things. I want praise for not being a source of pain to her, like my father, my sister, my brother. My mother doesn't have to worry about me. Doesn't she see that as my gift to her? Will I ever get a thank you for that?

"I worry because I feel guilty. Your sister had it the worst with your father," my mother says softly. "For fourteen years she was the only child and your father really gave her a hard time. Then your poor sister got pregnant so young and the boy left, so she gave away her baby. Right after that, she had back surgery and was in a body cast for two years. Remember? When it seemed like her life was getting better, her husband left her in the hospital right after John was born. Believe me, I know your sister is not perfect, but life has been hard for her. I'm her mother. I worry. You are my daughter, her sister. I feel like I can talk to you about all of this. Am I wrong?"

My spine settles like melting ice cream. I am instantly cooler and calmer and ashamed for thinking such thoughts. I *am* both lucky and strong. And that should be enough for me.

"The moon is beautiful tonight," I say, looking upward, looking to change the subject.

"It's full," she says, stopping to catch her breath. "And such a pretty orange. Your favorite color, huh?"

"Bill says that even though the orange is a fantastic color, it's pollution or dust that makes the moon appear that way."

My mother gives a sharp nod of her head, as if she were mimicking a judge's gavel. She adores my husband and whatever he says she accepts as gospel.

"Slow down," my mother says. "I want to tell you something."

I wait, still a little angry, but less certain why.

"When we were girls, the old women in our village would call us over when the moon was full. They told us to raise our dresses over our hips and turn our faces to the sky. We were supposed to say, *Luna, luna, bella luna, fill me up*."

"Fill you up? With what, Mom?"

"Love. We were supposed to ask the moon for love."

I either laughed or rolled my eyes or did both. "Mom, you actually asked the moon for love? Like out loud?"

"Badessa," she said, calling me her pet name and straightening her back. "How are you ever going to get anything if you don't ask the moon? Some girls asked for love or health for a parent or new dresses. If you did this on a full moon, it usually worked. That's what we believed anyway." She shrugs her shoulders.

I catch her staring at the moon so I hold my tongue. I don't ask what the moon ever gave her. Had she asked for a daughter who did drugs? Hoped for a son who ran as far from life as possible? Dreamed of a husband who terrorized us all?

I want to tell her that a moon can't give anyone anything. But her face, so open, so beautiful, so full of belief, stops me.

I pull her away from the sidewalk and back behind a neighbor's huge live oak tree.

"Show me, Mom," I say. "Show me how it looked when you asked the moon to fill you up."

Back at my parents' house, I walk to my old bedroom to say goodnight to my nona. She is sitting on the edge of the bed watching the Mass in Spanish on TV. This is her nightly ritual. She mutes the sound and smiles when she sees me.

"How was your walk?" she says in Italian, speaking slowly because she thinks I am too American to understand her in real time.

"E' caldo fuori," I tell her. "But there's a full moon tonight. Guess what? My mother told me how the old women used to tell the young girls to ask the moon for love when she was young. She even showed me how to do it. And I did it, Nona. I said, *Moon moon beautiful moon fill me up with love.*"

My nona gently takes my wrist, turns it over, and slaps it with two surprisingly sharp fingers.

"Tua madre 'e stupida," she says. "You don't ask the moon for love. You ask the moon for money. You say moon moon beautiful moon to flatter her so she sends you money. Love is free. Who needs a moon for that?"

I am shocked by my nona's anger. "But Nona, not everyone has love or happiness or health. It couldn't hurt to ask for that, right?"

"Ascoltami," she says, holding onto my wrist again. "Just ask the moon for money. Don't waste your time asking for something stupid. Look at your mother. If she had money, her life would be different. Vera?"

"Different, maybe, but all she really wants is love and happiness, Nona."

My nona kisses my wrist. "We already have love. You. Don't be stupid. Ask for money. If you have that, you are free and that is more important than love. That is happiness."

Before I leave, I hug my mother goodnight. She's changed into a loose blue caftan. I can hear the television in my father's office. From time to time, laughter creeps down the hall. My dad loves watching old sitcoms where the America he thought he wanted still lives on.

"Come lock the door after me," I say. "I told Nona about the moon. She said you should ask for money, not love."

"Oh, she said that," my mother whispers. "That's all she thinks about, my mother. For her, everything comes after money."

"Did the old women tell you to ask for money, Mom? Who told you to ask for love?"

"I was young. Some of us heard money, some of us heard love. I wanted love and adventure. What did I know?"

"And yet knowing what you know, you still asked the moon for love tonight."

"You are wrong," my mother says. "I told you to ask for love. I asked for nothing tonight. I was just telling you about when I was young. It doesn't work after you get old. The moon only gives to those who can still hear her."

"Did you ever tell Augie about the moon?"

My mother pauses. "I doubt it. She never listens to my old stories. I know you hear me. Too much. Sometimes, you hear things I never even said."

She kisses my forehead and we hug goodnight again. As I hear the door lock behind me, I say a quick prayer that my father will fall asleep in front of his America tonight and leave my Italy alone.

I drive home slowly, soaking in the weight of the evening's words.

I am still alive to the world of the moon. I can ask her for love, for money, for forgiveness. She will understand me. She will hear me calling.

JENNY MAAKETO

Breaking or Birth

After Jan Verberkmoes

When the wind chime keens

is it the sound of her or herself calling

for her sister, or is it her hair and the air

w ail wailing? Or is it the memory

ore of a lost thought as an ossifying

into bones— ones that ache to set and settle

in my seat? Either way

there is a waiting in the sigh the silence

after her and her. And though it may

only last a moment an omen as the ear

hovers above trance the static

glance past a basket weave of hands

with thumbs tucked under lip and breath breath like a wreathe

the leaves sing until

its breaking into a quake an ing—

or birth— into all aching that space

before

when the answer her her

is always sometimes may

never be what comes—I could live live

a lifetime in that silence (.)

JULIA THACKER

How to Get Released from the Hospital

Dress fully in your shoes of paper.
Accept Dixie Cups of pills
the color of Easter eggs. Orange juice.
Swallow. Stick out your tongue.
Join yoga in the Rec Room. Share.
Ignore attendant shadowing you
and taking notes. Journal. Sketch a door
of bottle glass. A long complicated sentence
with hairpin turns and arrows. Sanction
your husband's plan to hide all but
the butter knives. When the counselor
says, *You are the most functional patient*
on the most functional unit, do not ask,
But what am I in the world.

KATHRYN BRATT-PFOTENHAUER

Epithalamium in Hades

Two rings
hammered into fists.

Hands
on each other's hands. I look

at him in the darkness.
I am marrying

the man I used to love.
There is something sad in that.

And the flowers
are wilting. And the dress

is stained with dirt at the knees. Yes—
I had sucked him off

in the garden before we were married.
I thought of myself

as an exhibitionist. Turns out
I just liked the trees creaking steady

against the fence. I liked the wind
whistling out my name.

WILL BROOKS

On Fall

Sometime between the ether of early childhood and the terra firma of teenage adolescence, among the front and back yards of suburban isolation, I existed as a young person falling. Every autumn, as the cold air would shake the leaves from the branches of the twin maples in our front yard, but before those leaves festered in wet piles on top of Bermuda grass neglected from a lack of sun, the first report cards would be mailed to our home. And after the majority of the thirteen people who lived in our home moved away, but before my parents entrusted me with a key to the mailbox, and before I started stashing away strike-anywhere matches to burn all school correspondences before my parents got home from our family's body shop, I began to grab at any loose branch during my fall, desperate to cling to the safety of early childhood.

My eldest child, Jane, cried after the first day of fourth grade. Her friends weren't in the same classroom, she explained after I asked what was wrong. She needed help with math, she said, after the second week of school. So, I printed off math worksheets from Teachers Pay Teachers, hoping to correct her academic trajectory before she hit the ground. But she began to open the bedroom door she shared with her sister at night, complaining about not being able to sleep during the fourth weekend of school. Her restlessness continued, and her teacher sent a note home explaining that Jane had been falling behind academically after the fifth week of school. A form was sent home asking if my wife and I would be okay with Jane attending counseling sessions after the sixth week. I signed my name while waiting for the cool autumn winds.

In southwest China, 4000 meters above sea level, covering over two million square kilometers, there is the Tibetan Plateau. And on this plateau, there is the source of a river. And with this river, there is a gentle westerly dip guiding it toward the edge. And at this edge, there exists a fall.

Between the summer of my third-grade year and the autumn of my fourth-grade year, before I began to worry about the repercussions of mailed report cards, my family moved from my grandmother's house in Crowley, Texas, to a home on the outskirts of southwest Fort Worth, in a neighborhood known as Meadow Creek. The suburb was filled with Lockheed Martin engineers purchasing their starter homes and working-class families buying their dream after years of strict scrimping and strict saving and strict scarring of their bodies with labor. My family was among the latter.

I work as a teacher, which I say is like having two full-time jobs. I have two children, which I say is like having a full-time job each. I am a graduate student, which is like having a full-time job. I stay up all night, sick with worry, and I'm so dedicated to this practice that it feels like having another full-time job. So, six full-time jobs. And if a full-time job is a minimum of 40 hours a week and a week is 168 hours, is it mathematically possible for me to work six full-time jobs?

I don't know.

I never paid attention during math class.

What I do know, and I spend considerable time exploring, are my feelings. And it feels like I'm trying to spin plates that are doomed to fall.

Jane keeps asking me for extra hugs. She keeps asking when we're going to spend time together. And while I take her with me grocery shopping, I think she means something else. And I try to figure it all out while locking myself in the bedroom that doubles as my office while I seek the silence I need to read

the narrative lives of my students. I read their work for grammar, for style, and for the evidence of a fall into a darker life. As a teacher, I am trained to look for students nearing the edge. I am trained to report such students to counselors. And while it's tricky, I am trained in recognizing tension beneath the surface.

And so, the water obeys gravity and falls into China and flows westerly, following gravity still, becoming the Yangtze River, the most sediment-heavy river in the world. This sediment comes from the river's fall as it clings to dirt and rock, eroding it while combining with microplastics and industrial waste wash-off. Erosion is natural. Plastics and industrial waste are byproducts of work.

"Work harder!" my mother had screamed.

"Work harder," I whispered to Jane, "please?"

But she heard my voice waver. The attempt to hold back passion is recognized. She thinks I'm mad at her, but my anger flows to myself.

TOMMYE BLOUNT

Klavalier

Made of Duretta cloth sateen cape and collar.
Cotton cord and one cotton tassel. Price, each $7.00
—*from* Catalogue of Official Robes and
Banners: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan

Nature thrives on hierarchy. One species
daren't be so cavalier as to mingle
with another. It's mulish to assume man
can horse around with what our Father has
sired. A mongrel needs discipline,
wants to be told what to do,
shown where it must go by ship, whip, or
science. Among the counted atoms
even boundaries are counted on
—each charged particle knowing
what to do with those without
a charge, knows how to keep them reined
in their places, all gathered together
for the sake of an invisible kingdom.

VANDANA KHANNA

Dear O—

A decade into your leaving, I'll take an axe
to our bed. I'll refuse every man that asks—
not because I miss you, but because, when
have I ever belonged just to myself? I do
regret that I didn't turn away from their eyes
fast enough, how I let wine rid me of my
dreams, night after night. How I let them go
on about old gods, new brides. Sirens' songs
like tinseled silver. They tell me the deep sea
tastes like the rusted-out hull of a broken boat.
Sooner or later, everything sinks. Truth is,
enough misery poured from a mouth can
ruin any dream. When it's time, I'll bite
my tongue, make my own water.

Dear O—

I prayed that someone would offer to kill them, though
I had no guts—just a one-trick pony, a man-child,
and an old hound left out in the rain. A husband
prone to absence. A sad song in every cup wetting
the suitors' lips. Another mouth, another set of eyes.
I can't count them fast enough before they start testing
the locks for weakness, baiting the dog. I'm only ever
half-theirs, half-yours. Picture a threadbare room:
the river of my hair bent around another's thick, relentless
fist. Every night I become an all-or-nothing kind of girl,
padlocked to time. In dreams, you come to me as
rhyme on the tongue, as blue current and whitewash.
For you, I border the glittering sky with cotton. For you,
I unwind—pull at the pins holding me in place.

ALVIN LU

Carnival of Souls

In the late afternoon, we were heading toward Ely, through surprisingly hilly and verdant desert. The salt flats were pooling from fresh rain. Voices returned to my head, not the mechanical ones I had become used to, but the voices out there, in the desert. They were still there, and they could speak to the voices *in here*. How long had it been? Between Fallon and Austin, someone had carved the entire preamble of the United States Constitution into the embankment.

I walked across the highway and a sand lot to the Motel 6, then up to the night window. The pool had been drained and was lined with silt. I was given a second-floor room. There was no window for ventilation, just a fan fixed into the wall. The shower stall, a single piece of plastic, came with two bars of soap, no shampoo. The walls, furniture, and sheets were all orange.

In the morning I headed back across the highway for the included breakfast at a nicer hotel. I took the offerings from the buffet to the patio that overlooked a ditch and a scrub-covered hill. The only other person around was a middle-aged man in a cowboy hat, who just sat there smoking. "I need my coffee," I said, to explain why I didn't feel like talking.

"A-yuh."

The GPS showed I was heading north, amid smatterings of rain. Later, in the dry midday heat, I had a salad on a picnic table next to a soldiers' memorial in a town square. On the other side of the fence were kids playing with hoses and trampolines.

Regret? It was just the diffusion of the tension that had been building for weeks, during which time my spirit had left my body. When I finally returned to the place where I had lost it, on the side of the highway, I slowed down and called it back, as I had been instructed to do. It may have just been my imagination, but I could feel it click, like a bone popping back into its socket.

Fat, Sugar, and Salt

What was notable was that my brain had ceased to function. I got caught in the middle trying to pick a lane or remember what time of day it was or juggle more than one task, such as packing and eating and dressing. What made it difficult was the deprivation of context, so all that existed existed in this endless stream of the present, but this was not only *not* detrimental to activities such as reading, editing, and thought, but to that tuning toward the inner ear that I had been missing for a very long time.

I waited under the giant head of Charlie Parker, addict and practitioner of a dense and self-reflective midwestern modernism. America convulses in these reaches, geologic tidal waves and the infinite horizon. What is replicated is the human technology of building roads through inhospitable territory and moving cars through them.

The rainbows were indicators of turbulence. It was sharp and fresh and clear and temperate, the large land green, shot through with water. It was a summer afternoon in a dumpy mountain resort, a little bohemian, still rock 'n' roll, teenagers bent over vintage arcade cabinets, phones sticking out of their back pockets, the salty spring water streaming out of the ground beneath their feet.

As temperatures topped out at 105, cows made their way down into watering holes to cool off. Night arrived with cicadas blasting from the trees. I was only able to process one thing, but it was a very large one. Afterwards I had my carne asada burrito alone in my hotel room. More fat, sugar, and salt.

Style

As I drove, it occurred to me that thought sprung from this flat and open landscape would take on its reverse character. By necessity it would become dense and self-reflective. Because there were no mirrors, one's reality would always come into question.

There was something else whose existence I had long suspected, but which no one ever spoke of, which was the physical border between East and West. This would seem to be a significant landmark in this country, which is wider than it is tall. It possesses that mythic waterway, but it seems to be in the wrong place, off-center to the east; rather, I found the division with my own eyes and felt it on my skin, where the arid West ended, leaving behind desiccated cornfields, and the verdant East began. Almost immediately after I crossed it, a thunderstorm appeared on the horizon.

At another gateway—to which frontier this time?—I walked down the old downtown street. The arching landmark glowed like a ribbon of light in the night sky. The crowds were sparse, if bubbly, and the people, contrary to what one might be led to believe, at ease.

There were cities of soot-darkened high-rises and rivers crossed by iron bridges. I did not know what I had been expecting, but it was not this quilt of neighborhoods hemmed into its hills, like San Francisco. I had anticipated something else before I began this trip and was now definitely lost. I had also not anticipated the horizontal lines of the Midwest in the heart of a vertical city like Tokyo. But that had been the case, too, I was to discover a few short weeks later, as I left a frenetic Ikebukuro Station for a world of memories. As with so many things in Japan, and in the Midwest, place could be defined not solely by location, but a sense of style.

TOBI KASSIM

Abandon Green Space

CVS was ours! For a moment at least–
after two boys ran across the shop face popping guns
after each other. After the police showed up asking
about what they found behind it–
I was just trying to go to work. Just saying *I thought*
y'all would've had cameras out there.
The pandemic sky above bled different; indigo
infused red. After that summer the sky above it was smoke.
We watched the muffled sun lobbed behind CVS from our balcony
across the street, cars filed into the drive
thru kiosk to swab their noses. Snow piled over black
trash bags and shopping carts in the bushes. My rewards
discounts were toothbrushes and sunscreen from unlabeled bags
inside dude's coat lapels. All night CVS was overflow
parking for our basement shows. After Kevin installed a brokedown
Altima with fake wallet enticement in the passenger seat. We milled
around the papered windows after meetups.
After new ownership posted notices on all
our parked vehicles the dusty Altima remained. Because CVS
owed us *something*. A free tow for the abandoned shell
at least: remorse for the potholes that swallowed the cars.
In the end we got a fence around the lot, unflattened grass
broke green lesions through the pavement.

Once or twice a week we come home to blue lights
blockades off the road. Gurneys. Once our neighbor's kid
took a ride after toxic air squeezed recognition from
his eyes, dilated rings around nothing. CVS doesn't stand
for anything you know. The wan light over the window
offers pharmacy to the raccoons and seagulls
that still access the grounds. Maybe
this is the new grass that will make Orchard
residents happier. *City dwellers will have better*
outcomes they say, when they green the lots.

STEVEN LEYVA

Blues ://: Storm ://: Lush

What song has ridged its blue
against the mountain's slow groan and erosion?

North Carolina I must make a flute
of my throat, to say your name, pressing gentle

or stiff on the orifice of all those vowels.
(enter the interlude of wren's interrupting)

And what of the vow in each vowel?
A beggar's promise not to steal

bread. Give us, this day,
the choral odes of gravel road. Resolve

or don't resolve
says the careless chords of mountain

rain. Plain magic. Not sleight
of hand, but lover's conduct. Wood winds

now you allegro with the oaks
and hold, hold your vibrato. When

the wound cannot be seen
still play, still sing. It's silence

://:

not death that is God's vigorish. Even
Prospero without his magic knows this.
Caliban, Caliban in the hawk's cry
but the entire tempest in the quiet after.

://:

I and another—the orange quartered
and eaten—citrus :: aphrodisiacal :: thunderclap
on the tongue's sky—I, and I

alone with an old fashion's
peel. What is left over from faithfulness :: ardor

made strange and luscious—.

AMY THATCHER

Mary in the Margins

There is nothing to me.
I disappear like small breasts
in an oversized camp shirt.
The other virgins have gone,
wearing white cotton
archival gloves into
illuminated pages where
their opulence will be written
into history. I sit drawing
at my desk, an olympic
foreground of overgrown
peonies. God help me,
I have not earned my ending.

ANDY BUTTER

Folie à Deux

I feel it most when I swim and thank God. As water curls into every crevice and over every inch I become aware of my skin as a continuous surface: I am a bounded thing. I am *this*, not *that.* Most importantly, I am me and not my brother. He hears voices that aren't there. Bluetooth speakers chirp with threats of murder to his newborn daughter. Behind the basement walls there is a continuous scratching as neighbors tunnel into the house at night to kill his wife. No one else hears the voices and sounds. Of course we don't; they're not real.

My brother and I get mistaken for twins all the time. I visit my hometown and everyone calls me by his name. Our own mom can't tell the difference between our voices if she can't see us. I'll talk to her from the other room, say some heinous shit just to get him in trouble. We walk the same. We smile the same. We even sit on couches the same. The trouble is we think the same. From just a glance across the room I can tell if he's hungry or thirsty—the elemental things.

I was five, he was seven. We played in the mudpit outside the farm where we grew up. The farm was where we tested our presence against the world together: when we were lost in the adjacent cornfield and could hear the combine's dread approach; when we ate SpaghettiOs with meatballs as we watched the cow slaughter from afar; when biking and the neighbor's dog tackled my brother in the road and there was blood and dust and fists. The world was *that*, we were *this*—together. Covered head to toe in ditch mud, I thought it was impossible that I was stuck being me and he was stuck being him. It felt like one of those impossible coincidences that we were so similar, had the same parents, but were different entities. It felt impossible in the way it feels impossible that the moon and the sun, from our vantage on Earth, appear

the same size. In the pit, I would take a fat mud gob and smear it on his chest. Draw a star on his collarbone. A heart where I thought his heart was. *This is what the ocean smells like,* he said, streaking some mud on my nose. The wind caromed through the tall grass in waves. *That's what the ocean sounds like.* In the mudpit the question arose that's never left since, *Why am I me and not you?*

As a kid I reached toward him constantly, wanted to be near all the time. Touch, touch, touch. Entangled in the mudpit, I wouldn't be able to tell you whose arm was whose. If I found a finger and bit, it was anyone's guess who would scream. Now I want distance. I'm so scared of his schizophrenia. When we walk past each other and our shoulders brush, I worry the voices that have taken over his mind will travel through our skin into my mind. It's not rational, I know; not much of this is.

Metaphors are human inventions to compare unlike things, to make sense of the ultimately incomprehensible world. They are useful to us humans, as much as they allow us to draw helpful distinctions so that we can lead a meaningful life. We make up delineations for our own purposes so we can say *this is us* or *that's not us*, but borders, edges, lines—all of them are myths. What my brother is is so close to me, but skin keeps us apart. We are two unlike beings, but the metaphorical impulse can blur even those lines, so that we are similar to the point that his illness is my illness, my mind also lost and stuck in the confusing mire.

From here, the moon is the size of the sun which is the size of a nickel, he said around an early evening campfire, holding a coin up to the blazing orb. A handgun was asleep in the weeds under his chair, to ward off the paramilitary Nazis he knew were planning to raid the house later. I see him play the nickel back and forth over the setting sun, then the rising moon. Sun again. He says the moon and the sun being the same size is proof of a flat Earth, and of a CIA conspiracy to hide that fact from us.

I can't feel what's in my brother's mind anymore. I don't know what's gone awry there, but I know it's something horrible and full of suffering. As

he plays with his nickel, and his gun snores, I think of where we're from, this Earth. I think of the story we were told while young of God's breath blowing us into consciousness from the mire of mud. I see my brother put the nickel over the sun and imagine a real eclipse—all my beloveds awash in the local solar light, he makes them temporarily dark. I think of the skein of Earth's crust, and all my ancestors buried there, shivering when the continents tremble, or fingered by ghastly rain during a downpour. I think of the bounded edges of his mind, the mudpit still a living memory for him. The sun was in the sky then too, of course it was. It was real, it was the size of the moon the size of a nickel. We played with mud for hours, even ate it, not sure if our bellies hurt from laughter or dirt. Later that night when the moon's lid had shut over its eye, I heard him crawl out of bed and throw up the day's offal on the bedroom floor. I pretended to be asleep, but I tasted mud.

DONALD PASMORE

La Playa, La Grieta, La Amante

I feel mildly violated
—Brent Leroy

The jellyfish lay still, sea-brought
voyeurism misting through the sunbathers

before the broken animal. It didn't respond
to the murmurs, it didn't know

the language or it had already died. *Ten euros*
if you lick it, Grant said, and I was almost broke

by then, but really I was spurred on by the hope
that some spark was left. Most things die

for no reason. Even more things die alone. Jellyfish
lack brains, but I still gave it a final kiss, let my tongue go

where few have gone before because I had
recognized it. I slowly licked its nematocysts, allowed the barbs

to latch onto me. As the tourists and Málaganians
gasped or spoke languages that fluttered

into the breeze like moths trying to swarm
my face, I entered the jellyfish, let it know it wasn't

the only one lost on foreign sand.

DUSTIN BROOKSHIRE

Quality Men: A Grindr Villanelle

Inspired by Randall Mann

I'm only interested in quality men.
Not into younger guys—all brats.
Don't message me again and again.

No response is a response. When
will people learn? No fems. No fats.
I'm only interested in quality men.

Over 55? Better be a ten.
There's no bell curve. That's
that. Don't message me again.

This ass is a prize you can win.
Be successful. A man of many hats.
I'm only interested in quality men.

Own. Don't rent. I love a pen-
thouse with a balcony for our chats.
Don't message me again and again.

No BO. I don't want a Pig-Pen.
& don't forget to send your stats.
I'm only interested in quality men.
Don't message me again and again.

PIOTR FLORCZYK

Negative Capability

Not the rain.
Not the sun
slicing the clouds.
Not the rows of
daffodils blinding
the passers-by.
Not the buttons.
Not the fingers.
Not the cranks
being gripped
& turned turned.
Not even the water
rising & falling
whenever a pleasure
boat wants out.
But why is it always
about leaving &
not about returning?
Not the salmon.
Not even the ladder
left behind
by Jacob's kin.
The cavernous ferry—
not a pleasure
boat—sank,

but seven of us
were pulled out
alive. We're shivering
under blankets—
the widow, the rebound,
the ex, the barber
with a comb
for a harmonica,
the chewing-gum girl,
& the law student,
& the barman.
You be the judge
re: what happens
next. But
not the storm.
Not the sandbar.
Not the dog
that paddled to shore,
then barked.

ELLEN KOMBIYIL

Ars Poetica: Devouring Mussels

poor things we
pry open

with a knife:
what it means

to be human,
tourists taking pictures

of our lives
in intricate ruin.

(Not even ruin
but murals

of ruin, these
murals are

ruined themselves.)

Mottled, wet,
they announce

our doom.
Armor

slides from us,
bodies soft.

Quit fucking
around!

The body,
a stuck bus.

We want
to taste it all

and all
at once.

MICHAEL CALEB TASKER

Missing the Jack and the Ace

Money was tight. It had been close to a year since I'd had any kind of luck and I borrowed left and right until no one had anything to loan. I racked up a tab at the Copper Corner and even over at Rosebud. They were bad enough I wasn't welcome in either place until I had real cash money. There wasn't any work and no one bought any wood even though the cold nights were coming on early again. I had cords of it stacked up behind my mother's house. At least she'd stay warm. Even MacIntyre had nothing for me. Someone had been fucking with his traps, driving him up the wall and sending him up and down the line, finding one here or there, until he was running on empty. It sounded like something Sig would do, so I got away from MacIntyre before he came to the same conclusion and took it out on me.

But when I ran into Red and he told me he owed me a beer I knew my luck had changed. I had been dreaming about beavers all month so it was a matter of time. Red brought me to the White Owl, though. People only went to the White Owl when they wanted to pay too much for a beer to impress a girl. What the hell was Red thinking?

We sat at a booth and a waitress in a white buttoned shirt and tie came to take our order. She took her time looking at me. Not in the way waitresses took their time looking at Sig, though.

"Why are you wearing a tie?" I asked. "You aren't a businessman."

"Well, you're a little sexist."

"Thanks." I'd straightened up. I never had a pretty girl be so straightforward with me. Maybe I had been wrong about that look. Maybe the beaver dreams were about this girl. For a second I thought about telling her about the beavers, but changed my mind. She'd take it wrong. "I've been told that once or twice," I lied.

She shook her head and frowned at Red. "He doesn't know what it means, does he?"

Red laughed a little too hard. I saw his gears turning, trying to figure out how to get to her. He shook his head like I was some kind of idiot. The man could barely read. I read a book with the word enervating in it every second page but no one seemed to know what the word meant. I knew what it meant. It was a good book, though.

I thought about my beaver dreams and just smiled. When luck was with you, it was with you. Even Red couldn't mess that up.

After a few beers Red started buying whiskey. He took me along with him. He might have owed me a beer, but he sure as hell didn't owe me a whiskey. I waited for the other foot to fall. With Red there were usually a few of them.

"You still looking for work?" he asked.

"Who isn't?"

"I might have something. I heard you work a trapline now and then."

"Sure. I've done a little running with MacIntyre. You hear that someone is moving his traps around?"

"I've heard. It's happening all over." Red waved two fingers in the air and our waitress came back. He was tipping her pretty well but it didn't get him anywhere. "I need someone to help me track them all down."

"Track who down?"

"The traps. Help me find them."

"MacIntyre's traps?"

"Right." He took a long drink and looked around like he'd lost something. "Want to help us out? Make a little cash while you're at it?"

"Who's the us?"

"Me. MacIntyre. You. Say, how's that girl you used to pal around with? The little shadow."

"Adel? Mac's kid?" Why was he asking about Adel? She took off after

she finished high school but I saw her on the road once in a while, when Emil took me south for horse work.

But Red may as well have been talking to himself. "We're getting five dollars for every trap we find. I'll get you two dollars per."

"Reward money?"

That seemed like a lot. Traps didn't run too high.

He got the waitress back with another round. When he paid her, he dropped the money on the floor and she bent over to pick it up. I watched her and wondered where her forward spirit had gone. Red followed my eyes and grinned. She didn't look back at us. And Red didn't get his change back either. She was pretty fast. Faster than Red. I don't know if he even noticed. Or maybe he just had so much cash he didn't care.

I hated trapping. I wasn't any good at it. I had no staying power. But looking for metal was a far cry from looking for fur. It was something I could do. And sometimes I did it damn well.

I raised my glass to Red. The whiskey had gotten to me already. When he smiled his mouth never stopped opening. Then I passed out.

I woke up in Red's truck. I don't know how I got there. The sun felt wrong on my face and I tried to curl back to sleep, but Red turned on the radio news and started talking about the waitress like he was going to go back for her, like he had made some kind of progress. It was all hot air. Kind of like the news. I switched it off and opened a window. Who drives shut up in a coffin? I looked at Red.

He smiled at me again and I waited for the dream smoke to come out of his face again but nothing happened. He looked like shit, though, like one of those guys who spend the whole summer hiding from the sun in the Rosebud, embalming themselves.

I looked out the window. The sun was all wrong.

"Where the hell are we?" I asked.

"Little past Hobbs."

"Hobbs? What for?"

"Traps. Remember? You're working for me, now." He lit a cigarette. He smoked the same brand as Sig.

"I know that." I didn't like the way he said it. I was helping him out but, somehow, he said it like I owed him one now. Shit. "But why the hell are we heading down south? I always go north." I hated going down south. There were too many people down south. And never any kind of good luck.

"We go where the work is."

"But MacIntyre's line is up north."

"We're not running his line."

"I thought we were helping him out?"

"We're helping out everybody, okay. There's a crapload of traplines down near Burnt Rock."

"I don't know anyone who works near Burnt Rock."

"Well, I do, kid. And they all pay."

"I hate going down south." And I hated it when he called me kid. He only had three, maybe four years on me. He didn't act like it though.

"Buck up."

We drove most of the day. He bickered at me about the open window and I told him to buck up, so he started chain smoking and telling me about his girlfriends. I wondered if any of them were real. We stopped at a roadside diner and ate cheeseburgers up at the counter and they kept refilling my coffee faster than I drank it. I thought I'd have to remember the place if I ever came south again.

It was after ten by the time we got down to Burnt Rock and the sun was still setting. We left the car at the campsite and walked toward the lakes, where the traplines ran. There was a lot of dry wind and the sky was clear, all blue sky-dust and simmered ember sunshine.

Red wanted to get started right away, go find a hut to crash in, set

down our sleeping rolls and find some traps but I knew the land better than he did. A hell of a lot better.

I got us lost up on a hill and then settled in for the night, got a fire going and rolled out next to it, looking up at the sky. It was still light, but only just.

"What if it rains?" Red asked.

"It won't rain."

"You got a tent?"

"I left it in the truck."

"Shit. I'm going back."

I settled in and Red walked away. I was pretty happy when he didn't come back. It was good to have the night to myself, out there, even if I was too far south.

I didn't sleep that night. I didn't want to. It had been a while since I'd been out in that kind of quiet, in that kind of sky. There wasn't any good firewood around; just cottonwood and some soggy birch. I used the cottonwood. There was a lot of smoke but I liked the smell. I let the fire wear itself out and fried up Red's ham steaks over the coals and, in the dark, I listened to footsteps, small and careful, fade away as the wind came.

Once the sun came back, I got a couple of hours sleep and woke up all damp. Maybe I should have grabbed the tent. I got the fire back to flame and spent a while going through the pack Red left behind. He had some old tools and a mess kit and a sleeping bag. More ham steaks. An axe that had seen better days was strapped to the bottom. The steaks weren't looking too good any more so I threw them into the bushes for those small footsteps.

It warmed up a little and I was thinking about moving on, by myself, working my way up to Coyote Creek, maybe spend some time chasing beavers, when Red came back, singing one of those Buddy Holly songs he liked. He was grinning like he'd won something. Or like I'd lost something.

"You missed out," he said.

"How's that?"

"A couple of pretty little things were camping out. Needed my help in all sorts of ways."

I couldn't see what he could help anyone with. Drinking, maybe? I just shook my head at him.

"Think we can clear out of here in two days?" he asked.

"How am I going to know that?"

"You're supposed to know how long it takes to run a line."

Jesus Christ. What was he talking about? "But we aren't running a line. Normally, our best bet for finding a line would be to follow the lakes, get all the way up to Twisted Smoke. But where's normal right now? I don't know what to think if there's jackasses moving traps around."

"Twisted Smoke? That's damn near fifty miles away. How long will that take us?"

"I got time."

"Shit. Okay. Let's just get going then."

"Aren't we going to eat?" I asked.

Red looked at me. He was getting itchy, like he had somewhere else to be. Guys at the Rosebud got like that if they went too long without a drink. He started walking. Good thing I ate his ham. I followed him. He took us the wrong way, but I let it go because it was too good a day to worry about anything.

After a couple of hours, we stopped by the lake and I asked Red about the jackasses, the guys moving the traps. How were we going to find a trap that was off line. Did the jackasses move the markers, too? How far off the line were the traps? Who did we return them to, once we were all done?

Red just got cranky.

I found a few right off the trail, a few feet from a blue marker. I showed Red and he bagged them. Winked at me and kept walking. Two hundred yards on there was another blue marker, another two traps.

"How do we know which ones need returning?" I asked.

"Grab 'em all. We can sort it out later."

I didn't argue. It was beaver country anyway. After the dreams I'd been having I didn't think it would do any good to have a beaver stuck in one of those things.

While we walked along the lakes I saw driftwood and standing deadwood and small pebbled beaches with cold water easing along the edge, all begging to be used for a night or two. Red walked on pretty quickly, half chuckling to himself, half telling me how much cash we were going to make. I wasn't moving fast enough for him. I kept stopping, thinking, wandering in one spot. He just wanted to move and bag the traps. Some people checked their traps every day or two, but it looked like no one had been in those woods for a hundred years. Maybe more. I kept looking at the lake, at the water's edge, wondering what kind of luck I'd have down there if I was alone, taking my time, panning for gold. But I was broke, and Red's deal was a sure thing. You don't look a sure thing in the mouth.

We took it slow along the trails. Red bagged at least twenty traps and I did the math. I had never made so much money in one day. But it was a lot to carry. Red wasn't used to any kind of real work and he got pretty sore and pretty sour. And I got pretty hungry. We didn't have any more food and I didn't have my fishing gear. Just traps and Red's mouth.

Even so, it was good place to be. Once in a while Red got quiet for a little and I heard beavers smack the lake and pine trees moaned under the warm wind and far away birds cried.

Red never stayed quiet for long. At least he didn't talk about food. That was all I could think about. I didn't want him to ruin it. Thinking about food when you're far from it needs a careful balance. I zeroed in on cream-filled

cupcakes. Once Red cashed me out, I'd head to a gas station to buy a couple of packs. Chocolate icing and cream.

We bagged a few more traps. Red found a couple off the trail when he went to pee.

"Damn near lost my wang in it."

That didn't make sense, but I ignored him. "There's probably more just off in the thickets." They were hard to see. I wondered how many we had missed. It was a hell of a scavenger hunt.

"Because it's so long." He laughed at himself. Somebody had to.

"We should stop for the night."

"Let's look for a shack."

"That might take all night."

"Shit. I hate sleeping out."

"You brought the tent, didn't you."

"Still."

We got a good spot near the water. There was driftwood everywhere and I got the fire burning high and rolled a few logs over to sit on. Red popped the tent, up away from the water, and I made tea. Drink enough and it fills you up. After the sun set over behind Mount Blackburn, I lay back in the soft pine needles and listened to the fire crack and the lake ripple. I almost stopped thinking about cupcakes.

When I woke, it was still dark. The fire had burnt out and the sky was low and clouded over so it looked like wet ash. And it was cold in a very good way. There was a coyote watching me, at the water's edge, not more than ten feet away. A pike that must have been at least seven or eight pounds flopped weakly at the coyote's feet. I thought maybe the food was for me but he picked it up and took off, ran west into the hills. I was pretty impressed he could carry such a big bastard. It put me in a good mood. One that even Red couldn't step on.

In the morning we started out. I took us off the trail, looked hard for

traps that were off markers, or not even set, just lying there. After a few hours we got one, but it was a quiet day. At least in terms of traps. Red wasn't quiet. He didn't shut up. He grumbled the whole way, kept trying to get back on the trail, wouldn't carry a thing, got pissed off because he said I had led him the wrong way and I didn't know the first thing about trapping. Well, that was true.

"And what happened to our food?" he asked.

"What food?"

"Shit. Didn't you pack any?"

"I should have bought some cupcakes."

"What? Cupcakes. You sound like a little girl."

"That makes no sense, Red. Everyone likes cupcakes. A little cream filling, chocolate icing. Now we're talking."

"And where the hell have the traps gone. We aren't even on a trail anymore. I thought you could read a trapline?"

"Not really. I've only ever helped out MacIntyre." I didn't mention that he had fired me every time. Or I wandered away if my dreams got going. I told Red we had hit our load, we couldn't carry more anyway, and he gave me a sour look and took off.

That afternoon we came out onto Road 32 and made our way into Twisted Smoke. Red was worried about how we smelled but all I got was pine sap and wood smoke and a wind that kept dropping like it was looking for ice. And after seeing that coyote I was getting pretty itchy. I wondered where he was headed. Somewhere good. Maybe he knew where a little gold was. He looked the type.

We stopped at the gas station and used their hose. The lake water was better. I wasn't sure about what was in the pipes.

"Wonder if they got cupcakes."

Red frowned at me and kept walking. I caught up. I didn't want him to shake me, not when he owed me.

"We drop the traps off with the cops or at the post office?" I asked.

"What?"

"Who do we give the traps to?"

He stopped and looked at me.

There was a bar down the road. I had been there once or twice, passing this way and that with Emil. Music came from the open windows, a little fast and a little sad. Nothing like Bob Dylan.

Red looked at the bar. "I need a beer."

"Okay. I guess we can return the traps later. I don't have any cash but you know I'm good for it." I grinned at him.

"Right."

"Do they even have a post office or cop shop in Twisted Smoke?" I asked. I looked around. It was a pretty quiet town, but it had two paved roads and three bars.

"Sure. Cops are everywhere." He started digging into his pocket. He pulled out a five and gave it to me. "Here's an advance. Why don't you go back and get those cupcakes?"

I took the money before it was gone. "I'll come with you. Get that beer first."

"Suit yourself. I might drink a while. Guess the gas station will be closed soon." He shrugged. "You up for another round in Casterbridge?"

"Another round?"

He let out a sigh, looked a little worried. "Casterbridge got hit bad. Everyone was talking about it back home. None of the locals can find their gear. I'm going in as soon as I return these here traps." He took another five dollars from his pocket. "Get me some of those cupcakes, too, okay kid? Enough for a couple days for us both. Then meet me at the bar."

That was a lot of cupcakes. I took the money and turned back for the gas station.

When I got to the bar, Red was gone. I didn't mind too much. I had a bag full of Hostess cupcakes, the good ones, and three dollars left over. I'd catch up with Red. He'd shell out.

I got a beer and went into the back of the bar, where a girl was playing the violin. It was a good sound, fast and exciting and it kept the sprinkle of drinkers quiet. I watched her for a while before I realized I knew her. She had on a new pair of jeans, but she still looked like Emmylou Harris. Sang almost as well as her, too. It made me happy to see her, to see her looking so well, and I drank too quickly and had to spend the last of my money on another beer so I could stick around.

Finally, she finished up and came right over to me. When she smiled, I thought about my beavers again. Here they were.

"Well, well, Bronco Bill," she leaned in and I shook her hand. I should have tried a hug. "That was some ride."

"You saw it?"

"What little there was to see. You got tore up pretty bad." She held up two fingers to the bartender. He brought over a couple of bottles of Coors and she pushed one to me. I love Coors. "I owe you," she said.

"I'll take a beer or two," I said. "No guitar?"

"The violin was cheaper. And easier to move around with."

She smelled good. Like detergent and cold skin. Her eyes were dark and laughed a little all the time. I wanted to stay close to her.

"I thought you followed the circuit?" I said. "What brings you so far north?"

"Promises." She smiled and looked over at the bartender. He was watching her like he owned her. My beavers slipped away. He looked a little old for her, a little bent for her, but then what the hell was I? At least he had a job. I don't know why, but the good ones always go for guys with jobs. I never saw the appeal.

I saw a wedding ring on the bartender. That was another thing

women seemed to like. I gave up on trying to understand anything, but when I finished my beer, she waved for another one.

"What about you?" she asked. "I didn't think any rodeos came up this way."

"They don't. But I'm always up here."

"You miss it?"

"Miss what?"

"Riding."

"No. That was a first and last for me."

"How about the circuit? The whole thing?"

I shrugged. But I saw under her skin a little. I knew antsy when I saw it. I wanted to hold on to her.

I was a few drinks down and feeling it when Red walked in. He slid right over and got close to us both. His rucksack was empty.

"Hey kid, who's your friend?"

"Emmylou."

She smiled at that, held out her hand. She had a quiet way of keeping a little distance between her and Red. No matter how he moved. A lot of women had that.

"We get paid?" I asked.

Red frowned and nodded. I waited him out. He called out for three beers and when they came, he took out his wallet. There wasn't much in there. Maybe he kept the real money in his boot.

"We'll sort it all out another time," he said. "Now, we got good company. So, let's drink to good company."

Between Emmylou and Red I didn't pay for another drink the rest of the night. I tried to get my money's worth from Red but I'm a slow drinker. It hits me hard and I vague out and half the time I forget to actually drink.

The bartender stayed close. I didn't know if it was jealousy or money,

but he had me worried either way. I tried to do the math on what Red must have in his boot but the beer got in the way. I knew it would be a lot. Hundreds. The last time I had hundreds I got rolled.

She went back up to play for a while and I watched her, tried to feel special, like she might be singing to me, but it didn't work. The bartender grinned at me, with his job and his wedding ring. I was just a debt. I told Red to pay me out or get me a whiskey and he got me a whiskey, said there were too many types around to be showing off cash. He had a point. The guys in the bar were a little rough. Old but rough.

The guy next to me starting moaning about tourists and thieves. I didn't know who he was talking to. He said he had been cleaned out and how the hell was he going to make a living. He'd been drinking the one beer for an hour. I had bottles lined up and a pair of whiskey glasses. When I started nodding, he turned his talking to me. I guess I was as good as anyone. I told Red to get him another beer, he needed it more than I did.

"Who the hell messes with a trapline?" He took the beer but just kept talking at the air. "No one can afford that shit."

"Not you too," I said.

"You got hit?"

"You think it's kids?" I asked. Rearranging a trapline sounded like something kids at the high school would do so they'd have some drinking stories to tell. Or Sig. He lived for drinking stories. But if it was Sig, he'd take the traps and sell them for drinking money.

Emmylou finished up her set and came back. Red bought her a beer but he didn't try anything this time, didn't even talk much. My mind was swimming. I had been spending too much time inside and I hadn't had a straight thought for weeks. I needed to get out again, go away, by myself. Maybe get up to Tombstone for a while and get a little quiet.

I looked at Emmylou and thought about my beaver dreams again. I wondered where they were. I kept waiting for them to fall into my lap but I

thought maybe I was going about it all wrong, maybe I should go looking, go hunt a little, until I found them. Beavers fell into Sig's lap, not mine.

Even with only two or three beers under his belt the guy next to me got louder, started to bristle in that Rosebud way. My nerves chewed at me. I tried to listen to him, but Red talked at me, told me we should go outside to eat those cupcakes.

Sometimes he was a smart guy. I winked at Emmylou to let her know I'd be right back and followed Red out.

It was cold out and I liked it. The darkness was easy on the eyes and we walked down the block and sat on the curb in front of the closed-up post office and ate through nearly all the cupcakes. Icing and cream in all of them. I don't know what they put in that cream. I would have paid twice the price just for the cream alone. Red told me I had the right idea, getting those cupcakes. Told me I was a good guy and I wondered how much he'd been drinking.

Twisted Smoke is pretty big. It's no Riverdale but we found a good playground with those big plastic tubes to sleep in because the clouds were heavy and grey, but I got claustrophobic and, in the end, I found a pile of bark chips that were pretty soft. It didn't rain too much, either.

Red woke me up. I was still a little drunk but it was starting to sour. I needed to go sit in a lake, let the cold straighten me out. Also, I was holding onto a bottle of scotch. An expensive-looking single malt that I'd never had before. There was two inches left in the bottle. I wondered how the hell it got there. Beavers, maybe. Red took it off my hands, put it in his pack and told me we'd get to it later, right now we needed to head out.

"Where?"

"Casterbridge."

"How about breakfast first?"

"There's no place around here for that."

"Oh." I rubbed my face awake, got up and followed Red back down the

highway and after two, maybe three hours, we turned in for Casterbridge and walked until noon, when we got to an old campsite near a lake. I stripped down and got right in. It was all run-off from the ice. My heart almost tore through my chest, but it got me clean again. And it got me wondering what I was doing running around the woods with Red, chasing traps, chasing money. What the hell did I need that money for?

I got a fire going in an old pit someone had left behind. It was a good spot. Even if I was with Red, even if he was giving me that look again. Spruce cracked in the wind and sunlight hit the north mountains and burnt away the clouds and I heard water running, shallow water, the kind that was good for hunting in. I knew better than to look for anything with Red watching me like that.

We camped out at the lake and later, after we caught and grilled a little two-pound pike over a smoky greenwood fire, Red brought out the scotch but I was in too good a mood to drink any, which put him in a good mood, too, and then in the morning we started looking for traps again but worked outward in a grid, coming back to our camp every night.

After two nights all we found was a half dozen traps that I wouldn't let Red touch, they were clearly marked and hadn't been moved or buggered with, and one rusted coilspring bear trap that must have been there since I was a kid.

All the slow luck made Red cranky. When we found the bear trap, I think he wanted to use it on me. I told him to hang in there, we'd come good again, but I didn't believe it. At least we got to come back to the campsite every night, sleep out in the open, the ground real soft under my sleeping bag, beaver tails popping on the lake every so often, and smoke out the few bugs still fighting so late in the season with another green fire.

Four, maybe five days in, Red found a couple of good ones but there was a solid walked-out trail and I told him it was somebody else's line, clear as day. He looked like he wanted to hit me.

"Damn it," He almost spat. "There's traps everywhere."

"But they're right where they're supposed to be."

We were out there a while. Maybe ten days. With Red there, it felt like longer. I wanted to stay out, never mind the traps, just stay out in the open. The campsite was top notch; flat, soft ground, good water, out of the wind and right in the sun that time of year. But I had left my things in Red's truck and I'd left my truck out front of the Copper Corner, so I had to stay close to him. Plus, I thought I might as well get that money he promised. I had a few debts.

We found a few traps, maybe half a dozen. It was still good money, still worth the time, and when I woke in the morning and Red already had the fire going and the rucksack next to him, I knew he was done. On the walk back to Twisted Smoke he moaned about how it wasn't worth his time, he made more driving a big rig for a week during the summer. I let him carry on, but I didn't listen too hard. He liked talking money.

When I was a kid my father talked money. But it was different. He talked gold. And for a while there, the gold talk wasn't about the gold; it was something else, something better. I could listen to him for hours back then. He pieced old stories together with dreams and rivers and the best good luck. But he couldn't stay still. He walked away from a hundred good pay days and sold the rest for pennies to the dollar. I was glad I wasn't like that.

Half of me wanted to get away from Red quicksmart; never mind what he owed me. Maybe it'd come down the line one day. And if not, it would be worth it to be alone again. But I didn't like the debts I had hanging over me. They weren't going to go away any time soon. After we cashed in the traps in Twisted Smoke, I'd head home with pockets full of money. I couldn't remember the last time I had pockets full of money. With all the cash I could buy donuts every morning and talk about Joan Baez to the girl at the coffee shop, make a few jokes to see her blush; I could get some real meat and cook up a week's worth of chili at my mother's. I had a hunch it was going to be a long winter and I needed her happy with me so I could use her basement for a while.

It was a long walk back to Twisted Smoke. Red's arms gave out early and I carried the bags, even his overnighter. The rucksack was pretty heavy, even though we didn't find much. We should have waited until the snow fell, I thought, done it right, used a sled. I should have just called up MacIntyre and gone out with him in the canoes; but he wouldn't have paid me a dollar or two every time I found one of his traps.

I was dreaming pretty hard and didn't notice the truck until it was right at us, blinking the brights. I stopped and put the bags down.

"Is that Lucien?" I asked.

Red spat. "Who cares? Let's go cash in."

"Maybe he'll give us a ride into town?"

"He's going the wrong way."

"It's about five minutes in the truck."

Red muttered something and kept walking. But he walked pretty slow.

Lucien pulled up beside me. I grinned but he just scowled at me and shook his head.

"What the hell you been doing?" he asked.

"Helping Red out," I said. "He's paying me."

He looked at the rucksack and nodded to it. "Traps?"

"How'd you know?"

"And here I thought it sounded like something Sig would do."

"I don't know about that," I said. Shit.

"Right." Lucien sighed. He looked tired. "You know, when I heard about this shit, I drove right down and I've been circling these damn roads for a week."

"Why?"

"Well, I thought I'd find Sig before he got himself arrested again. Go figure I find you instead. Jesus Christ."

"You can get a ride, but not into town and not with that pack, there."

"Why not?" I asked.

"There's cops snooping around."

"So?"

"What do you mean?" I felt like a fifth-grader again. I never really knew why I was in trouble back then either.

Then he broke, just looked tired and shook his head at Red. "You going to tell him?"

"Nothing to tell, Lucien."

"Right." He looked at me again. "Well, make up your mind fast. Get in or keep walking and see where that gets you. Either way I got to go. I said I'd give a girl a ride down to Red Rock."

I looked around like a girl might appear in the trees. "Red Rock?"

"Rodeo there starts next week. She likes the circuit. And there's someone here she wants to get away from."

The wind came on cold again and I got light headed. In a good way. "Does she look like Emmylou Harris?"

"How the hell do I know?" But he gave me that easy mocking smile, and I thought about spending two days next to her, maybe a little more if there was some honest work in Red Rock, and I got in the truck next to Lucien.

literary shade: a definition

The expression "throwing shade" has been around for a while, though it has recently become more widely used to describe witty takedowns and acerbic critique. Merriam-Webster's first recorded use of "shade" is from the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning*, which chronicles the mid-1980s NYC ballroom culture as seen through the eyes of Latinx and Black queer and trans performers. Merriam-Webster added the term to its pages in 2017, which is also the year we began publishing Literary Shade.

Literary Shade aims to publish impeccably-crafted poems, short stories, or non-fiction that throws shade at the institutions that have whitewashed our literature and history, be they laws or events or texts authored by cisgender, white supremacist, misogynistic homophobes. We believe that shade—subversive wit, withering critique—can empower.

And there is a lot of shade underneath the cherry tree.

LITERARY
SHADE

BEN KLINE

Whine

(Desire Psalm, 19:3)

My nasal whine's so high it reaches heaven,
chromosomes and bodily fluids

bullies and nurture ignited,
my vocal fry a ruin

the devil calls swagger.
But I see how many men

fear what they can't keep
under thumb, what submission means

if flipped, their privilege
not a granite mountain,

but a worn pebble skipping the lake
we gather near at dusk,

threading reeds and thighs,
my squeak unleashed

like a frog's tongue, sticky
and quick near their ear,

their loose gasps, their shudders
crowned with touch-me-nots

when I touch them,
we break their secret

joy under my thumb,
pressed between their lips,

a ruin I call
from their bellies

pressed into the ground,
their pitch so high

gnats and bats scatter and all
I hear is *harder, yes, please*.

EMILY LIGHT

Terrarium Inside the Heat Dome

July 2024

On the day Kim Kardashian rode a private jet to Paris for a slice of cheesecake,

my neighbor's sprinkler system was on in the rain.

There are no automatic sensors, just the rare click of awareness,

like when Julia told me Hollie wears vegan Birkenstocks,

or when I thought the wad of sidewalk chewing gum had molded black

only to look closer and see the ants, stuck stiff and dead.

I didn't want to bring animals into this, but I can't stop thinking about them

in this heat dome that has closed over the country like a crystal cloche.

The fox is open-mouthed as she crosses the street too hot for our dogs' tender paws.

There are only so many ways to get where you think you need to go.

After saying eating animals is "messed up," my son walked barefoot

ten shore-town blocks to get ice cream, and back.

That was the evening I realized there aren't fireflies at the beach,

only the singular gray bodies of mosquitoes.

At home, fireflies light up the graveyard

like the stars have descended in a living veil.

JULIE MARIE WADE

From the *Jeopardy!* Category, THE SUBJUNCTIVE:

It's not that I never think of them, the children I never had—it's only that I don't regret their absence. As a lonely only child in a stifling suburban home, I played my share of Mother: stuffed sofa cushions under my shirts, writhed on the bathroom floor, gave birth to my dolls & wrapped them in receiving blankets. Soon, though, I recast myself as Sister—the better fit—pushing around a blue buggy at the mall, cooing at Amy & Betsy while our mother demanded to see a manager. I first learned about sperm donors on *Designing Women*, I think, when Mary Jo considers having a third child on her own. My mother looked up from the ironing board, snorted as she said, "It's always a gamble, even if you know the guy!" But I just kept thinking how lucky he was—*that guy* who stopped by the clinic, spent a few pleasant minutes with a piquant magazine, then sauntered back to the rest of his life. No one poking or prodding, nothing invasive at all, just a quick unzip, a slap on the back, & some extra cash in his pocket. Did the man ever wonder about the women who scrutinized his photograph, his profile, then decidedly passed him by? (*Not tall enough, a clearly padded résumé, family history of asthma or gout....*) And was he curious at all about the women who chose him, who lingered & pointed at his face in the binder, or these days, clicked to enlarge? I marveled in Health Class when they taught us how men were always full of potential. That little murse of maybes they never stopped swinging, from the first wet dream to the final slumber. No biological clocks with timers set to go off. No chorus of voices trilling, *Before it's too late!* No lives built around such imperatives, restrictions. Think of the children who might arise, far-off as campfire smoke, even without a given man's knowledge—children who could come into being even after he had passed on. For years, I've had nightmares of being pregnant. I don't

know how it happened, since I don't have sex with men, & I can't find a single person willing or able to perform an abortion. In these dreams, I'm screaming, sobbing, begging strangers to "Make it go away!" The pregnancy is always a punishment. My fear gives way to dread, & my dread turns desperate as I keen, "Help me! There's nothing I want less than a baby!" It's true in waking life, too: I don't want a baby. I never have. I can't imagine raising a child I didn't resent every day. The current Pope says I'm selfish for feeling this way, but touché: I find this Pope more disappointing than all his predecessors combined—they never peddled false hope to litanies of women & queers. Yet somehow I'm tearing up at a trailer for *Delivery Man*, a ludicrous comedy where Vince Vaughn learns he has sired hundreds of children through a mix-up at a fertility clinic. *How lucky*, I muse, for him & for all the men who find out they're fathers years after their kids are grown. I know this is not a popular opinion. I know I shouldn't wish it, but I do: to sit across from some bright, amiable college junior who shares my tendency to talk too fast & flings her hands so something surely spills. It's the coffee this time, which she loves just as I do & slurps with clumsy gusto. So now her shirt is stained, & she's apologizing even while giddily recounting a scene from Philosophy class. Perhaps she took Creative Writing, too, & the professor praised her poems, made her feel that *she* was full of potential. With those big blue eyes & smiley white teeth: "Do you think I might get that from you?" Which is the first line I'd cut from the screenplay, by the way. Strike all the schmaltz that rises from my own mind. How do you tell a kid, even 20 years old, that you didn't miss her when she was coming up but you're thrilled to meet her now that she's arrived? Short answer: You don't. Long answer: You don't, dumb-ass. But that's the nature of wishing, of course. It's not reasonable by design. "Can I meet Grammy?" she'll ask. It takes a moment to realize she means my mother, longer to accept the obvious fact that she has fantasies all her own. How parched my mouth will become as I whisper, confess, "I actually never thought to tell your grandmother about the—well, the *possibility* of you."

"What is If I Were an Egg Donor?"

RYAN VARADI

The Jewish Space Laser

The Jewish Space Commander meets me at the pod bay doors.
The Jewish Space Commander welcomes me aboard, asks
isn't the view nice: the whole of the lumpy earth,
like a matzo ball bathed in star-soup?

The Jewish Space Commander swears me to secrecy,
gives me my assignment: data entry.
I'm no good with numbers, but the Jewish Space Commander says
that's the only job left.

The Jewish Space Laser, they say, is off-limits
because I don't know any Hebrew.
And the manual's all in Hebrew
says the Jewish Space Commander.

They say it's fine that I don't believe in the big guy,
but I could at least pretend to know what I'm saying
when I repeat back my father's prayers
like an underpaid stenographer.
The Jewish Space Commander says
I've got the right hair and nose, but not the right tongue.

Still, the Jewish Space Commander lets me look at the laser
when they give me the tour—because it's the big attraction.
They say it's no toy, and we're not allowed to use it

for burning forests
or dismantling capitalism.

The Jewish Space Laser is strictly for projecting psionic transmissions.
The transmissions are from our grandmothers,
who ask if the people of earth are eating enough
because they look so thin.

The Jewish Space Laser is an ambivalent god.
The Jewish Space Laser is all titanium and twisted angles.
The Jewish Space Laser looks like a cross
between a menorah
and millions of missing faces.

The Jewish Space Commander makes small talk as we walk.
The Jewish Space Commander says my ancestors are all star-ghosts
because my mom's not Jewish.
The Jewish Space Commander ignores all my questions
about Space-Jews of color.
The Jewish Space Commander wants to know
what I've read about Palestine.

The Jewish Space Commander says here is my desk
and let them know if I need anything,
bagels are in the kitchen.

The Jewish Space Station is quiet.
The space-desks are all empty
and everyone's out for space-lunch.

The Jewish Space Laser is powering up now,
it hums softly,

a little song I don't recognize.

TOMMYE BLOUNT

André Leon Talley's Caftan

Lot 31: A black silk faille full-length court coat, Tom Ford, circa 2017
—from The Collection of André Leon Talley *auctioned by Christie's*

Conductor of the black train,
never leaving anyone behind,
taking us all with you into the gloved

whittled rooms of the all-white. The only one,
their spectacle speaking

their tongues better than them,
conjugating French as easy as a needle
through an eye, each eye soars up

to meet you, a threat
to their well threaded ateliers,

their high chandeliered ceilings
still too low to contain you, Kong-ing
their Queen, King of their monkeying around.

And we shadow your tall shadow
of a door, adore when you touch each white thing

in order to make it black, a black eye
hovering over their features. O, your pen,
how it redlines what they thought they knew;

deletes, rewrites, transposes
their paled imaginations. Brother of the in

and out, of the stitch, at the stench of their haute
mess, you scrunch your big wide nose,
sniffing at the beauty of a dark future.

WILLY PALOMO

Between Estrellas

One of my abuela's earliest memories is being abducted by aliens.

Sometime in her niñez, mama Tere caught a blood-popping fiebre. Cue feathers flying round la yarda and chickens hanging naked by their feet on the clothesline. Mama Tina, mi bisabuela, would slit their throats in one swipe—cha!—and let their blood pebble the earth. She must have been young then, mama Tina, but I can only imagine her old, like in the photos, knuckles and fingers twisted and bony as chicken feet. She was dead long before I was born.

Cha, cha, cha!

Mama Tina wielded her blade with the gusto of a government soldier. Every cut ends up in la olla, every cut except for the guts and la cabeza.

The sopita de pollo didn't make mama Tere any better though. Neither did la sobadora or la sticky lucha made of boiled mango, guava, and eucalyptus leaves. Sweating like a burra underneath the April sun, mama Tere creaked on her hamaca, a dozen buzzing flies tickling her face. Her green dress hung wet off her limbs, grim and beautiful as a siguabana washed up on shore. Even though she was sick, mama Tere wants you to know she was always muy hermosa. If they ever make a movie of her life, mama Tere insists that she needs to be played by a young JLo, because she was fit, the sort of beauty known to cause fist fights and worse.

According to mama Tere, this is when the aliens saved her life. In the middle of the night, they shot abuela up to their spacecraft, sleek and metallic. Not even los estados unidos has medical instruments like them, she told me. I have not seen this part in my dreams. I only get as far as witnessing an ultralight beam shining over mama Tere's body, turning her skin blue and pink, then blinding. When the light is gone, it leaves an atlas of purple and

green shapes shifting in the darkness of my corneas, abuela nowhere to be found.

The big-headed aliens slit into her, painlessly, the scalpel sliding soft and slick as rain across her belly. Mama Tere assumes the surgery lasted mere seconds, but nobody in the family really knows. Everybody in the family knows the story, apparently. Tías speak a little under their breath, their eyes grandecitos when they mention it, but the family treats it casually, the same way they talk about the campesinos hanging with their throats slit from trees, eyes wide as a gallina's.

Cha, cha, cha!

The tías continued to chop ayote, yuca, zanahórias, and plátanos, clamoring around the kitchen around ollas filled with sopa and tamales, hornos hot with costillas encebolladas. They hand me a collection of tomates to chop for the chimol.

It's like a jedi mind trick, the way they move from aliens to war stories to chores. Nothing to see here.

Cha!

Move along.

Cha!

Move along.

Poppa says you can't believe everything mama Tere says, but on the news today, the US government declassified thousands of documents related to UFOs. The feds have recorded over 500 UFO sightings since 2004 and that's just the stuff they're willing to tell us about. Government whistleblowers say the president is hiding evidence of non-human biologics. I wrote a whole research paper on the US coverup of alien life for debate. I had three whole pages of sources, single-spaced, 10-point font, but Ms. Rideout docked me a whole 35% because apparently the History Channel's *Ancient Aliens*, social media testimonials, and mama Tere do not count as valid primary sources.

What was I to expect from someone who listens to Fox News and other mainstream media during lunch?

"You were supposed to write about a political issue, not science fiction," Ms. Rideout said.

"The US government has been lying to its people for generations," I argued. "They've been hiding what they know about aliens."

"When you said you were writing about aliens, I thought you were going to write about immigration," she grumbled under her breath.

"What do aliens have to do with immigration?" I asked. We held eye contact for a fidgety five seconds before I stomped off.

"Why would aliens save the life of a random kid, Yoni?" Poppa snorted later. "Look at all the kids dying on the news today. Ain't no aliens out there saving them."

The thing is it's not just mama Tere. It's Barney Duncan, a Ute elder on social media who shares drawings of aliens in headdresses. It's Dean Harrison, a WWII veteran who was given electroshock therapy after he claimed an alien intervention saved him from an ambush. It's Area 51. It's crop circles. It's the FBI's The Vault. It's over 150 links in my "Alien Studies" folder of different testimonials, news articles, government documents, all pointing to the same truth: Aliens!

"I really shouldn't've bought you all those damn Baby Yodas when you were little," Poppa smirked, reading my essay. "Looks like it got to your head." The thing is, even if I had never watched an episode of *Star Wars* in my life, I would still believe mama Tere.

Mama Tere and I were on the way back home from Brain Freeze Mountain. It was my thirteenth birthday and she was the only one who remembered. The ice cream shop was closed. A sign on the door said they had gone out of business, which made me doubly sad because they were my favorite spot. They were the only shop that had flavors like mango-maracuyá and made their sundaes with fried plátanos.

Just then, as we stared in disbelief at the handwritten sign on the door, mama Tere got a call from her doctor and needed me to translate. It was the results of her recent X-ray for one of abuela's rotating ailments again: diabetes, cramps, asthma, la gota.

"Have you ever had a surgery?" I translated for the doctor.

"No," mama Tere said with a small smile.

Dr. Yang had me ask again. According to him, the X-ray showed evidence of some sort of operation. Maybe I was just butthurt about losing my favorite ice cream forever, but something about the way he said it rubbed me the wrong way. Like he thought abuela and I were stupid or something.

Mama Tere told me on the drive back home. It would've been over 40 years ago, she said, her voice faraway, as if she were still on some spaceship. It almost made me forget about my birthday.

Believing in aliens is a lot like being gay. People get really weird about it. You got to be careful who you tell.

I haven't told anyone I'm gay, but tía Shayla and mama Tere have always known. Like I remember when tía Shayla moved in with us while Poppa was in jail. We would read together and she would let me pick my own books. I was seven at the time, and she didn't blink twice when I chose *The Hips of the Drag Queen Go Swish! Swish! Swish!* We even drew our favorite drag queens together and put them up on the fridge. When she thought I couldn't hear, mama Tere told la Shayla my drawing was muy feo and to take it off the fridge, but to be fair, it was. I kinda suck at drawing.

Mama Tere didn't stop me whenever she found me trying on her heels with my favorite purple blanket tucked into my pants like a dress. She didn't stop me when she found me trying on her lipstick and taking selfies in the mirror with her phone.

"No 'ta tan mal," she'd smirk.

Or she'd add a tie-dyed scarf to my outfit.

Once she asked me if I wanted to be a girl para maquillarme. I hated how that word sounded in Spanish. Almost like I was making myself a machine. I want to be pretty, I told her. Bonita, a word that sounded like bonbons. Sweet.

Maybe it's better to say nobody knows I'm gay, but everyone treats me like I am. In both good and bad ways.

Around Poppa, we always had to be serious. I couldn't even laugh when we played games. You giggle like a girl, he'd tell me, frowning with his whole face, even with his ojeras. But I'm not a girl. It's just the way I laugh.

When Poppa got home from jail, my big brother Jose wanted to know if he got into any fights. The first and only thing I know about Poppa's time in jail is that a gay dude grabbed his ass and Poppa popped him so hard he got sent to seg for a month.

"I got my revenge, sho nuff," Poppa laughed, a big burly man laugh, of course. Before he could continue, though, la Shayla told him que para de hablar pendejadas en frente de los niños.

Poppa doesn't know about Moki, mi novio. Not even mama Tere or tía Shayla know. Because Moki's parents are Mormon, he and I keep it on the low-low, even in school. Our relationship is limited to lunch hours, texts, and recreational young men's activities, things like bowling, basketball, soccer, all of which Moki absolutely sucks at.

Moki sucks at anything that involves balls, we joke.

Ms. Rideout expected me to complete a revision of my alien essay by that Thursday, which sadly meant I couldn't go play basketball with Moki's church ball team and totally accidentally pass the ball to the opposite team. Moki would have to defend against those sweaty, muscular jocks all by his lonesome, unfortunately. I had to tell him between cold pizza and frozen peaches in the cafeteria.

Moki isn't one to give up so easy though.

"Why don't we just revise your essay before the game?"

Moki's hands trembled as he read over my essay. After ten long minutes reading in silence, he finally looked up at me with big eyes. Moki had eyes like mama Tere's hot chocolate. No, they're not Nestlé or Swiss Miss or whatever. None of that American garbage. Abuela's chocolate was made from these earthy balls of cacao ground with canela y azucar. When boiled, la taza had layers, including shadowy branches that moved in a simmer of cinnamon. There is a depth in the cup that slowly descends into a sweet darkness. Those were Moki's eyes.

"Dude, have you ever heard about the star people?" he whispered, nervously eyeing everyone within earshot.

I shook my head.

Moki pocketed the apple I hadn't touched just as the bell rang and winked. He had a test in Pre-Calc. He had to go.

Because Moki didn't want me to miss out on the opportunity to feel a six-foot-six priest teabag me during the game that night, he told me to meet him in our secret hideout after his math test. I had no problem skipping 4th period Spanish. If anything, it was the more responsible thing to do.

Only the techies really knew about it, but there was a theatre closet behind a big boring gray door back stage of the auditorium. I probably would have thought it was some sort of boiler room or vacuum closet if Moki hadn't taken me there himself right before turkey break. Nobody missed us because everyone was already sluffing class to attend the high school football state finals. The trophy typically was traded between the two rich suburban schools in the valley. It was the first time in a decade our broke-ass school had a chance at the top spot. The theatre closet held an assortment of extra props, set pieces, cleaning supplies, and mysterious cabinets of paperwork. I lost my makeout virginity to Moki right then amid the skeletons, billowing fairy tale dresses, and palm fronds. Although the closet was sometimes in use, it had been particularly vacant in the past few months, ever since Mr. Jolly, the

theatre teacher, got caught sexting two juniors. Talk about drama. They had yet to fill the position, and the one-man department was defunct until they could find a replacement who wasn't the PE teacher.

With my phone flashlight, I found Moki. He was hanging out on top of a spiral staircase on a cart that creaked and shifted slightly beneath my feet as I climbed up.

"I'm gonna let you in on a family secret," Moki smiled.

He took out a notebook from his backpack.

"This is Chuhukon," he said, shining his cell phone onto a page riddled with stars. "This is the constellation scientists nowadays call Pleiades and the Mormons call Kolob. Grandpa Bert says we descend from here."

Moki looked Mexican, and he was, but his grandpa was a full-blooded Hopi who lived on the rez. I didn't know what to say and I couldn't read his facial expression in the dark, so I just sat there, quiet, following the cell phone light. All the stars on the pages had bubbles next to them with notes on their brightness, their proximity to Earth, their names in other cultures, all hand-written and drawn by Moki. I had been with him for over a year now and I had no idea he was so into astronomy.

"Kolob is where the Mormons claim Jesus lives. Ancient civilizations have had crazy stories about these constellations for millennia, but only the Hopi know the truth. We are the children of the star people, and they will return to us."

"Wait, so you've been an alien this whole time?" I asked, looking up into the closet-dark void where his face would be.

"I am," Moki whispered, his lips and breath suddenly right up next to my ear.

For a single second, my mind raced. I thought about how Area 51 was in the Southwest and probably not too far off from the ancestral homelands of the Hopi. I imagined lifting his shirt and finding no bellybutton. I imagined him fingering the crown of his head and pulling down a zipper that exposed

his true face, a set of giant black eyes and pink scales. Then, I imagined the much less cool scenario where he said that pretty much all humans came from aliens and we're just what aliens look like.

I didn't have any time to ask questions or to think anything else through, however, because when I moved my head to face him, my lips found his immediately. My hand darted beneath his shirt, searching for a bellybutton, or the lack thereof, or any other sign of his alienness. Wherever it was, I missed it and slipped beneath his waistband. My heart fluttered as I fingered a damp tangle of hair. Moki's nails dug into the back of my skull and pulled me closer, his tongue lifting, thick and wet into my mouth. It was the first time I ever felt something that muscular and searching inside me, and in my hand, I felt something alien, growing. I squeezed tightly, as if by gripping onto him, I would learn the mysteries of the cosmos or at the very least understand why I always felt so extraterrestrial, especially when I was alone with Moki. The more I loved him the more I missed him, even when he was around, even with his teeth digging softly into my lips and his musk in my hand. The more I missed him, the more I squeezed.

Moki cried as my hand began to pump, a whimper at first. I couldn't hear him initially because of the creakiness of the steps, but they became full-on sobs as I picked up my pace. I was outside of my body, suspended somewhere in the dark between a gigantic Christmas tree and a cobwebbed windmill. He held me gently against his chest, weeping into my shoulder. Neither of us felt the staircase begin to roll.

The Spanish word for star is "estrella," which can be turned into the verb "estrellar," meaning to make into stars, to shatter, to crash, which is exactly what happened to us when a critical plank somewhere snapped, causing the entire structure to crumble.

I needed to wear a cast on my left arm for two months. Moki got away with a mild concussion. I didn't mind the pain. It only intensified what I was already feeling: the gallop in my chest, a stampede crushing my heart into a

fine powder. I couldn't cry until the pain hit me, and I wanted to cry with Moki. We were closest when we cried. I loved him best when I cried.

The janitor who found us thought we were two knuckleheads going on a joyride.

The next weekend, I spent hours on YouTube researching videos of Chuhukon and adding them to my folders. Grandpa Bert's stories were no cap. Some of the Hopi believed they came from aliens and the spirits of their dead go to Chuhukon to rest. Much to Ms. Rideout's chagrin, I doubled down on my essay topic, adding excerpts of Grandpa Bert's diaries as a primary source and eyewitness account. He had seen them before, too.

Just like mama Tere.

ARNALDO BATISTA

Letter to Ron DeSantis

I open the front door to the lot of them,
queer little cricket feet turned up to the air,
some of them smushed sideways like combed hair,
other crickets flattened underfoot, guts all around

green and gooey. This summer has baked some,
turned them into cricket fritters, crunchy husks
that rattle in the rare breeze, whistling their death
tunes. Each day, there are even more

dead. The ones in the trees and in burrows
marvel at this dead cricket tomb. At night, they crank
their legs together furious, singing and singing
their dirge. I haven't slept in months.

KELLY GRAY

The Eating Elegy

Sometimes all the air goes out of you.
The way your father said *smaller* to your daughter,
make yourself smaller.
You lose this air, this breath
like a balloon mouth pulled taut
into a sad sound, like some obscure Appalachian instrument
that your ancestors played
because your people were haunting,
haunting as in still
in your lungs, still holding
your breath, still baking
sugar pies between rib bones, still packing
you too tight into a bag
that is dragged
with its worn thin leather
through the space of an airport

and in your dreams the planes are always crashing,
something having been too heavy,
one wing and then the other, bird girl,
broken whore girl, you're in the bag girl,
you're a dead thing
with your cave mouth,
sucking the marrow out of a two-story pink cake

thinking he will be dead soon.
Maybe that is the year you will get thin,
maybe that is the year all the people who
were his people
who are your people
resurrect through the spoon
and you choke as women choke,
the remnants of the mouthful going back out.
Is it an eating disorder if you never puke?
Instead, you put all of him inside

the diner with the neon sign that says Eat Here
that you keep in the soft spot of your armpit
with a smoking section and the waitress he used to flirt with
named Ruby, or maybe he just called her Ruby,
with hashbrown and vinegar eyes,

but 40 years later you know the expense
of keeping your hair red for the obvious reasons,
the scalp burning with that cheap Clarion box color,
your gloves on in the bathroom of that diner
and the cook is throwing heavy plates
at swinging doors while another part of you
is masturbating to Jeremy Allen White
in tighty-whities
and there is meat
everywhere.

Hold on baby, you cry,
daddy is almost dead,
I almost got this hair right.

Your lungs,
full,
after all of it.

LUCAS JORGENSEN

Exit Survey from the Bureau of Busy Work

Dear Lucas, though we are sorry to let you go, we thank you for all your effort during your employment; you'll always be a member of our family. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible, and remember, as always, objectivity is our objective!

I. What did you find positive about your employment?

That it provided enough income for one to buy the fancy butter brand. That it prevented one from wasting the day in bed, the inevitable sense of rot. That the glue traps left out for vermin could catch a snake as collateral, which was horrifying, but for poems, provided imagery and subject. That it provided people—faces one could recognize as long as they were on the clock.

II. How did you spend your time off when you were employed?

Unsheathing a fresh stick of fancy butter from its golden package, building a multistep breakfast on its blubbery base—an omelet in the Spanish tortilla style overstuffed with caramelized potato and onion. Following breakfast by wasting the day in bed, losing all sense of self as flesh melds with the quilted comforter, becomes a fondue of skin and fabric, a skeleton forking the mess. Writing the poem about the snake in the glue trap. Writing it again and again until it captures the exact jeweled texture of its scales pressed against the trap

flat like a tarpaulin. Spending time with real friends. One too many cold beers. Slow, tired sex. Whatever new trashberg has floated up to top streaming recommended.

III. What advice would you give to future employees?

There's a window of mediocrity between the date of expiration and mold's first bloom. And of blooms: take cuttings of each bouquet you make, take the tomato so ripe it tosses itself at your feet before picking time. Take up smoking. Take bathroom breaks twice a day, even just to ponder your pale reflection in the porcelain sink. Craft each email as opaquely as possible. Commandeer the company jigsaw, jack, and belt sander to construct that deck you've always wanted. Collude with your coworkers to cover up each other's shortcomings—no one knows why the eggs didn't have the good manners to clean their own fond out of the pan. Clock in five minutes early, out five minutes late. Take the snake as an example: the harder you work, the harder the glue grabs. Unlike the snake, the choice is yours: choose to relax.

NICO AMADOR

Real-Life Test

From the time I was _____ years old I felt uncomfortable with _____ and being forced to wear _____.

I used to dress up in _____ and play _____ with my friends.

Strangers even used to mistake me for a _____.

Since becoming an adult, I have always felt like a _____ in a _____'s body.

If I could change anything about myself it would be _____.

The parts of my body I dislike the most are my _____ and my _____.

I don't really identify as part of the _____ community.

For as long as I can remember, I have mainly been attracted to _____.

I feel I would be happier if I was allowed to _____ and live full time as a _____ _____.

The people I most want to emulate are _____ like _____, _____, and _____.

Success for me would look like a _____, two _____ and a _____.

With Sylvia

Any unruly place can resemble paradise.
An ugly disco. The home I made inside
a tent by the river. Each day, a new face to put on.
A disastrously blonde hairdo.
The dream of myself louder, more
captivating than the forces calling me
toward a fatal end. I blotted out
the sirens, leashed the sleepless dragon.
I paid my dollar for a drink
and the cheap glamour of the lights
above Times Square. Good enough.
My thrifted gown a prophylaxis
against the mayor's petty ordinances,
encroaching developers, the married johns
left hot-faced and murderous with shame.
Some shit, I said to Marsha,
her flowers large as gramophones.
When we marched from Washington Place
up Sixth Avenue, I was right
as I ever hoped to be remembered,
nearly ecstatic. No knowledge
but the knowledge of my own long-limbed power.
I shouted into the parade. Power.
Not as the men did. I wasn't asking.
Power. Like a star chewing a hole in the sky.
If there's anything I regret
it's the crowds I left untroubled—

know what I mean? I wanted action.
I wanted the silhouette of my body
in a gold jumpsuit and I wanted to offend
anyone willing to trade in for the soft consolation
of a wedding and a life in the suburbs.
A respectable life. A village without me.

MICHAEL CHITWOOD

American Dream

The American Dream is rising
out of the plyboard and sawdust
and the goddamns of those
who make their living by the hour
on the concrete floor, those tailing the rip saw,
those swinging the circle saws,
those loading the nail guns and firing
at Maddox Modular Homes.

The American Dream is high quality and low maintenance.
The simulated knotty pine molding of the American Dream
is cut by Winton the Winker
who is at the age
where he can work full-time
without getting shorted on his Social Security,
and so he does
because daytime TV is nothing but whores and pretty boys.

Two entire American Dreams can be assembled each week,
built to individual desires,
which is a unique feature of the American Dream.

The American Dream fits into any neighborhood.

The American Dream is a registered trademark.

It is little known but true:
The American Dream floats.
You could fish from its bay window.

The American Dream frees you from a lifetime of payments.

The American Dream comes in a variety of colors.
The American Dream comes with its own wheels.
The American Dream comes apart for easy transport.

One caution: The American Dream will burn,
completely, end to end and top to bottom,
in forty-seven minutes.

JENNIFER LEBLANC

Love After Roe

The tea tastes of burnt, the toast
of damp. All across the country,

women are making plans, taking stock

of their men as a housekeeper monitors the larder.
You are a foreigner across the table from me.

In these new wide waters, I want to unmoor us,

surrender up our passports and papers
so we're relieved of all allegiances.

But I'm still American, for all my protest.

In the vast land of our bed, your hand
moves to the small of my back,

trills notes in the hollow of my neck—your overture

from which I turn, bitter.
Where do you stand?

The state has filled my hands

with many jagged stones, arrayed
smooth pebbles for your choosing.

I feel I should hold this against you.

But no, even in my fury I can see
you are not my foe, and our bodies,

when they love, create a separate peace.

EMILY HALL

A Solemn Responsibility

Because I know that no trick-or-treaters will come to our door, I sit in the kitchen all night sick to my stomach. In all the years we've lived in this house, no one has ever brought their kid to our door, and why would they? We live on the side of a major highway, where cars whip by at all hours. The only people who ever knock are strangers in broke-down cars asking for gas money. Whenever we turn them away, they curse at us or piss on the side of our home.

But this year, for reasons I don't understand, Mom bought a big bag of candy and sat down in our living room expectantly, chatting about the kinds of costumes she might see and fretting that the sweets she bought wouldn't be popular. And around nine p.m., when she realizes no one's actually coming, she begins pacing around the room before dissolving in tears.

As if on cue, I rush out and disappear into my brother's room. At fourteen, Chris is still young enough to go out trick-or-treating with his friends, but instead he's draped across his bed watching TV loud enough to drown out Mom's tears. I tell myself that because I'm seventeen, I'm too old to have fun on Halloween, even though most of my friends still slip on masks and blend in with the crowds in their neighborhoods. I can imagine them giggling under streetlights, their heavy bags of candy swaying. I can't imagine how light they must feel.

Shaking these thoughts, I clear my throat to get Chris's attention and then propose a plan: he and I will dress up and walk around to the front door to pose as trick-or-treaters. Chris says nothing but turns off his TV and walks over to his closet, pushing aside hangers to find anything that would work. From my own closet, I grab cheap plastic jewelry, a gauzy scarf, and a dress I usually reserve for church services. Chris shrugs on a faded blue robe and

clunky winter boots. We shuck the pillowcases off our pillows and walk past Dad, who stands by the stove mechanically eating fistfuls of candy.

We creep out the back door and run around to the front. When we ring the doorbell, Mom looks confused at first but then a smile spreads over her face.

"Trick or Treat!" Chris and I sing in unison, holding out our makeshift bags.

Mom runs to grab the bowl of candy from the kitchen and tips it into our pillowcases.

We sprint to the side door, repeating our performance, and then again to the back. Mom's eyes shine from happiness. She laughs and claps her hands. Chris and I laugh too and make a big show of spreading out the candy on our kitchen counter so we can swap for what we want.

If any of us realizes that this is the first time Chris and I have ever trick-or-treated, we don't think to say it. Our parents never took us, and anyway, from a young age, I knew better than to ask them to buy me a costume. For my first-grade Halloween parade, I held a paper plate decorated with a slapdash face in front of my own ashamed one, watching as my classmates pranced through the halls dressed as princesses or cowboys. Even when I was nine, and could have cobbled more together, I didn't ask because our pastor, Albert, stood behind the pulpit that autumn and condemned Halloween as the work of Satan while women wailed and trembled in the rows behind us.

It was Albert who pulled me out of my room in the middle of the night to stand before him, his wife, and my parents so he could save my soul. Mom and Dad sat beside him in our dark kitchen, beatific and tense, worried that I might disappoint their new friends by putting up a fight. I was drowsy, but I stood penitently before him in the dimness.

Albert recited a few prayers before declaring that I now carried the Lord in my heart. This was a solemn responsibility, he explained. I could easily disappoint the Lord with my actions, which would make Him turn away from

me, so I needed to take care of Him at all times. Placing his hands on mine, Albert told me all this slowly, but forcefully, as if this was the first time I was learning how lopsided love could be.

Out of State

I can't find any houses at the Seneca Army Depot, only the imprints of where their foundations stood. These spaces, which look like empty tooth sockets, remind me of when I had my wisdom teeth removed. The doctor warned me after the procedure not to disturb my gums, but my curious tongue prodded the holes anyway until I felt deep pain radiate through my jaw. I suppose, as I view the depot via Google Earth, that I'm poking at an absence, now, too.

The Army base was decommissioned in 2000, and I lived there around 1992. I'm not sure for how long, enough to attend kindergarten and celebrate two birthdays, at least. By the time we were in New York, I had already lived in Hawaii, Delaware, and Connecticut, but remembered almost nothing about them, a problem made worse by the Coast Guard's tendency to house its families on other branches' bases. When I try to describe Seneca to my husband, I get all the facts wrong. *I think I lived in Romulus? Maybe on an Air Force base? By a Great Lake, maybe?* Through the haze of thirty-some years, I remember that the town we lived in was known for its unusual population of white deer, so I use this to rediscover that I lived on an Army base by the Finger Lakes in Seneca. I read now that the base is gone, these deer have been allowed to reclaim the depot as their home.

Even if the depot hadn't been demolished, I still wouldn't be able to go back, though. Like all other military brats, my I.D. expired when I turned twenty-three, and I wasn't allowed on any bases without a visitor's pass. I was expected to meld into civilian life, as if I hadn't grown up seeing young men holding rifles near the front gates or heard the screams of aircraft bringing back bodies from Afghanistan and Iraq. My father could point to his uniforms, medals, and ranks as proof of his service. My brother and I had only broken memories and transcripts from three schools in one year.

I start to close Google Earth when I remember the military base in Indiana. That station is closed, now, too—Dad's expertise was commanding a now-obsolete tower signal—but the base itself was just five houses in the tiny town of Dana. I'm hopeful the Coast Guard sold the houses to the town rather than demolish them, and when I search Dana, I see its main street for the first time in twenty-five years. It still looks like the same place where we stood and watched Fourth of July parades, all crumbling brick and silos. But as I zoom out, I can only guess which house was mine from the tangle of roads on my screen.

I call my husband in to show him Dana and point to the squat, yellow house I think might have been mine. *Would you ever want to go back?* he questions softly, but I shake my head and exit the site. Dana was a conservative town that supported the troops in theory, but in reality didn't want outsiders arriving every few years. Our neighbors told their kids not to play with my brother and me, and on Sundays they refused to shake our hands at church. This animosity roiled for years until it burst on an otherwise picturesque night. We were waiting at a red light, listening to the radio and enjoying the breeze, when a man saw our out-of-state plates and swerved towards the front of our car. Leaning out of his pick-up, he spat at us and screamed, *GO HOME!*

Which one? I asked myself then. *Which one?* I ask myself still.

ZACK LAM

Digging

Every morning, my father and I streak
past the paved swamp where geese
still dent their beaks on the memory
of clovers. He glances at his knuckles
instead of the geese. Only in my father's dreams
is the searing concrete ripe enough to crater
with bare fists.

A century ago, his father's father
hammers enough railroad steel
to scrub linen in Toronto slums
but at least everything is his: his laundromat, his
machines, his hands itchy with soap-shriveled cuts, his
throat oozing chlorine fumes, mucus as brown
as his son's first scab. On the opposite shore, his
brother's tender back trawls the Vancouver gravel
as torchlight drags him to the harbor, a rope
burning his neck; a state-stamped letter travels
east on newly hammered rails. By the '30s,
my great-grandfather burns any letter
he cannot read. On the crumbling porch, he ignites
an envelope emblazoned "Expropriation." That night
he hums the drinking song his cousin once sang
years earlier in Toishan, before he rotted
in Japanese rows, his frost-bitten wrist
blanketing the chest of a stranger's baby. Two decades

later, paved back to China, my great-grandfather collapses
beside a hissing wok as the radio chants red hymns. A march
unspools past the window. Across the ocean, a laundromat
sinks below Nathan Phillips Square, the gleaming
city hall.

For as long as he lives, my father will glance at his knuckles
instead of the geese.

KEVIN MCLELLAN

Being Perpetually Human

She said, *Don't let them take your joy away* and then it happened, and now, a few times later, I say to the critic, *If your homophobia goes unchecked you might just become queer.* That's right, a house the shape of a mushroom, a once-home opened to the public. It's Easter and a Christmas cactus is in bloom there. It's a coincidence. As is the time I went to Salem for sex and asked, *Do you want me?* under my breath to a man too busy catching the train I disembarked to hear me. Later, I replied with an awkward *pleeease* to a museum attendant. But back to the house that only a few have visited since the drug-resistant fungus.

JENNY JOHNSON

Direct Action

The voice of the student on the radio, who's been on hunger strike
for seven days alongside a dozen classmates, is so lucid.

I catch a stammer of exhaustion in the speed of his speech

when he states their demands for: disclosure, disassociation,
divestment. We must keep telling ourselves this. Our bodies

can provoke change. Bodies in solidarity can

disrupt systems, yes, but a feeling greater than this.
The power to sense one another in space

in hunger in grief in rage in sweat in action—call it collective
proprioception.

The first time I blocked a street I was inside

a caterpillar suit. Six of us in affinity were stitched together, bound by
a heavy-duty tarp we'd sewn body-shaped sleeves into,

certain no cop could cut through. The only cogent plan was to stop

diplomats from entering the IMF. We were awkward at first,
faces half-masked by bandanas, civic muscles we'd barely flexed, each of us

a hand-painted letter spelling CHANGE, and then, arms locked

inside our exoskeleton, we were more.
We stepped in unison in front of a black van not knowing

if the driver would hit the brakes.

MARIN D. KILLEN

Finish Them! :)

I text my teacher friend every day and tell her what room I'm subbing in. Today I tell her what Coach Sellie's room is like: *it's like if a corporate office and a boys' dorm room had a baby out of wedlock.* I shove papers away in low unsettled piles to make space for my book. There are few papers but they're somehow everywhere, shivering and shuffling around on the desk, begging to slip and spin to the floor. I hate how they fall in a haphazard way, cutting around in the air like we're in space, like students who don't want to find their way to their seats. Zig-zag, cut up, slip, drift, float.

Yesterday I made chili that would last a week in its great stained pot. Now I stand in the break room eating it cold and I see a father holding his headless child. He waves the boy(?) around like he doesn't know where to put him. The boy's legs and arms hang in blasted pieces. It's strange to me how solid he looks, like a cement child whose pieces have broken off.

I text my friends: *Don't go on TikTok today. Or do, I don't know. I can't.*

I go to the bathroom and lean over the sink to vomit but I know I won't. It feels better to whisper *it's not real!* like I do after a bad movie, or after that Chernobyl documentary where the men melted into quivering green Jell-O.

In my mind, the beheaded child becomes a girl because I have a daughter who is five months old. The froggy hang of the toddler's body proves to me that the video is real: pot belly, thin shoulders, soft splayed hips where the legs haven't locked into their sockets yet. My eyes keep looking for the face like I must've

just missed it, and if I scan the photo I'll see her eyes, slinking and coy and cool, a fairy child hiding in the rubble playing peek-a-boo: *missed me missed me now you gotta kiss me!*

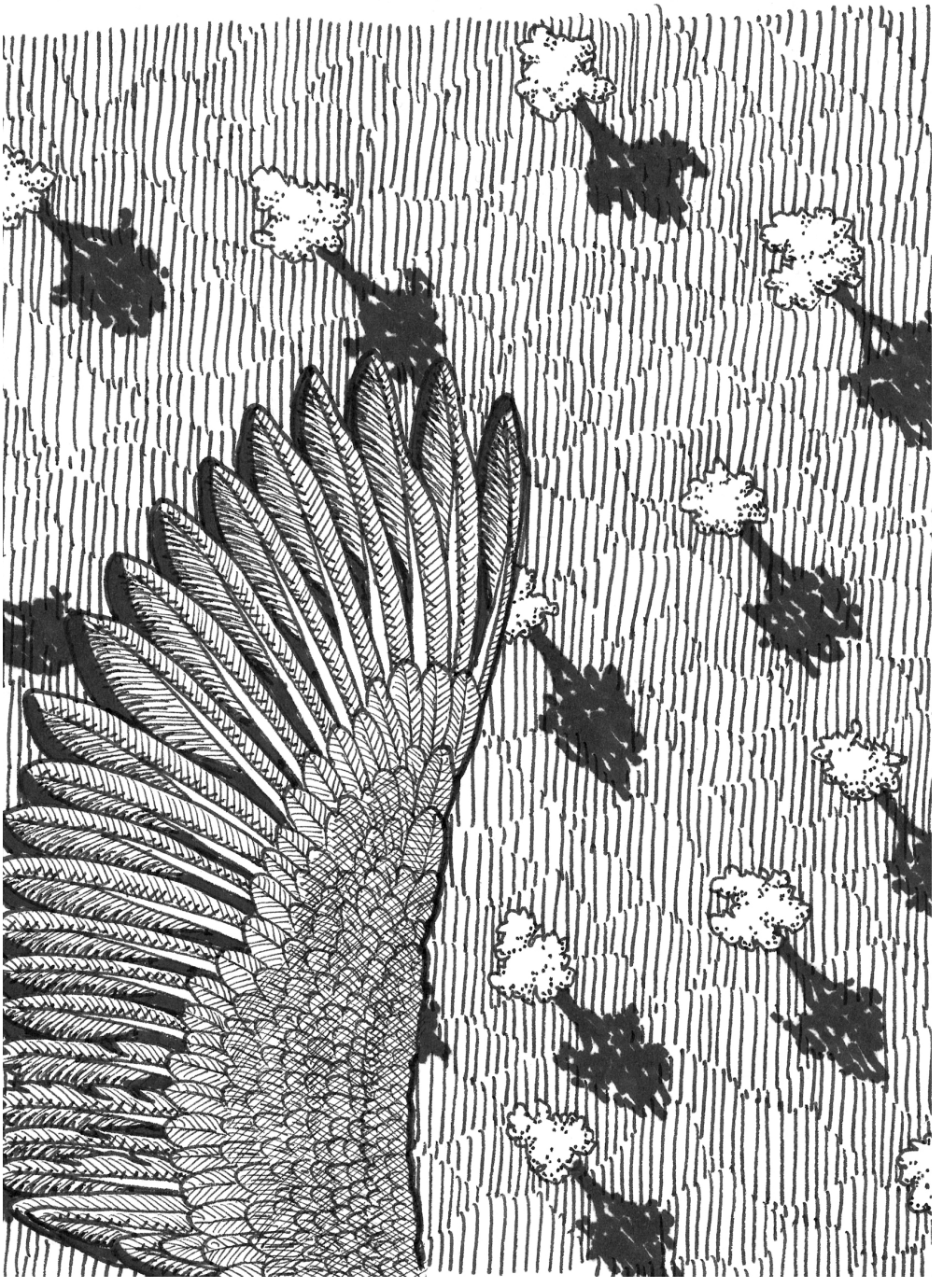
The next video shows Nikki Haley writing *Finish Them!* in big girlish letters on an artillery round for Israel. She adds *America <3 Israel* and signs her name. I wonder if we also sent them notes on flowery stationery that read: *slaughter them with us? check yes or no :)* and a bag full of bills with fat red lip gloss stains on them.

I eventually manage to cry, and I feel a bit like an impotent man taking Viagra and dry-humping my mattress. The tears fall for a moment and then there's silence and I go back to class and start reading *Helter Skelter* because my friends read it and I want to talk to them about something.

I start to wonder if the *Scream* movies were more serious than I thought. The bad guy *does* wear a cheap costume and a white mask, and he *does* chase women with big kitchen knives, and he *does* play in their blood and misspell words on the walls. He *does* have an accomplice who's the most obvious psycho you've ever seen and he *does* have a vendetta against your mother. He waltzes around in his high school and goes to the prom in a sleek back tux with his hair pulled back and greased-up. He's funny and he likes to call before he kills you, and he *does* want to know your favorite scary movie, and he will rip through Drew Barrymore's white sweater and you will watch it and laugh because it's not real, and you will mock him and say *don't kill me Mr. Ghostface! I want to be in the sequel!* and then they'll find your body split in half on a subway platform, or stuck like a pig in your own apartment.

Five students play Uno in the back of my classroom, slamming their desks like grown men playing poker. I imagine smoky air and jazz singing around them,

half-empty beers and sticky ketchup stains on the floor. Maybe there's a silent stack of dollar bills in the center of their table, a set of beaten wives at home to yell at when they lose. A girl asks *what's this whole all-eyes-on-Rafah thing?* and a boy with frizzy red hair says he's entitled not to care and *like, sorry you're at war or something that's not my problem?* and it's 1955 and James Baldwin is writing about his younger brother, saying *his face had been bright and open, there was a lot of copper in it; and he'd had wonderfully direct brown eyes, and great gentleness and privacy*, and I wonder if these kids saw the video, and I know it's possible they did because I saw someone beheaded on Facebook back in middle school, and it's silent reading time and they know that, and I yell to be heard over the desks squealing on the waxy floor, and another student looks over her shoulder at me, shrugs, and whispers *look, Mrs. Sub, they don't really care,* and I clasp my massive Stanley that I bought second-hand on Amazon and of course they don't, I know they don't.



contributors' notes

Dominique Ahkong is an Arizona-based poet of Hakka-Mauritian descent. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. She co-edits *Shō Poetry Journal*. More: dominiqueahkong.com or *@domkeykong*

Nico Amador is a trans, Latinx poet, community organizer and educator from San Diego, California. His chapbook, *Flower Wars*, was selected as the winner of the Anzaldúa Poetry Prize and was published by Newfound Press. He received his MFA from Bennington College, is a grant recipient from the Vermont Arts Council, and is an alum of the Lambda Literary Foundation's Writers Retreat.

Arnaldo Batista is a queer poet from Miami, FL, where he received his MFA in Creative Writing from Florida International University. His work can be found in *Prairie Schooner*, *Gulf Coast*, and *PANK*, and has been nominated for a 2024 Puschart Prize and for *Best New Poets*.

Tommye Blount is the author of the poetry chapbook *What Are We Not For* (Bull City Press) and the collection *Fantasia for the Man in Blue* (Four Way Books)—a finalist for the National Book Award. A Cave Canem and Warren Wilson College alum, he now lives in Detroit, Michigan.

Kathryn Bratt-Pfotenhauer (they/she) is the author of the poetry collection *Bad Animal* (Riot in Your Throat, 2023) and the chapbook *Small Geometries* (Ethel, 2023.) The recipient of a Pushcart Prize, her work has been published in *The Missouri Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, and others. She is a graduate of Syracuse University's MFA program in poetry and is a doctoral student in Comparative Literature at New York University.

Dustin Brookshire (he/him) is the recipient of the 2024 Jon Tribble Editors Fellowship awarded by Poetry at the Sea, and the author of three chapbooks, most recently *Never Picked First For Playtime* (Harbor Editions, 2023). He's the co-editor of *Let Me Say This: A Dolly Parton Poetry Anthology* (Madville Publishing, 2023), which was named to the 2024 "Books All Georgians Should Read" list by the Georgia Center for the Book.

William Ward Butler is the poet laureate of Los Gatos, California. His chapbook *Life History* is available from Ghost City Press, and his recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Bennington Review*, *RHINO*, *Switchyard*, and other journals. He is a poetry reader for *TriQuarterly* and co-editor-in-chief of *Frozen Sea*.

Andy Butter lives and works in the Twin Cities and is an editor of *The Call Center Collective*. His work is forthcoming or has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *Sierra*, *Passages North*, and elsewhere. More can be found at andybutter.com.

Adrianna Caputo is a writer from New Jersey, and an alumna of the *Kenyon Review* Writers Workshop and the Middlebury Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Her poems have been published in *Glassworks Magazine*, *Humana Obscura*, and elsewhere, and have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize**.**

Michael Chitwood's work has received the L.E. Phillabaum Award from LSU Press and the Library of Virginia Literary Award in Poetry. His new book of poetry, *A Day of It*, will be published by LSU Press in 2026.

Will Brooks lives and teaches in Denton, Texas. His poetry has been featured in *Quarter After Eight*, *Five South*, *Dear Human at the Edge of Time*, and elsewhere. This is his first essay publication. He is a teaching fellow at the University of North Texas, where he studies creative writing**.**

James Daniels (he/him) is a Black Southern poet, educator, and musician. A fellow of The Watering Hole, his work appears or is forthcoming in *Windhover*, *The Black Love Book* (SoftSavagePress, 2023), and *The Greensboro Review*. He earned his MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where he currently teaches. When he's not teaching or writing, he serves as an editorial assistant with LongLeaf Press, a community literary arts educator, and a freelance pianist.

Erica Dawson is a Black poet living with bipolar disorder in the Baltimore-DC area. She is the author of three books of poetry, most recently, *When Rap Spoke Straight to God* (Tin House, 2018). Her poems have appeared in *Bennington Review*, *Blackbird*, *Orion*, *The Believer*, *VQR*, and elsewhere. In addition to poetry, she loves her dog Stella, Wu-Tang Clan, and anything cooked with cardamom.

Barbara Duffey is the author of two poetry collections, most recently *Simple Machines* (The Word Works, 2016), which won the 2015 Washington Prize. She has received fellowships from the NEA, the Jentel Foundation, and the South Dakota Arts Council, and her poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Blackbird*, and elsewhere. A professor of English at Dakota Wesleyan University, she lives in Mitchell, SD, with her son.

Jeff Ewing's nonfiction has appeared in *Utne Reader*, *River Teeth*, *Phoebe*, *San Francisco Chronicle Magazine*, and *Zone 3*. His piece "A Ditch Runs Through It" received the California Newspaper Publishers Association Best Writing Award. His fiction and poetry have appeared in a number of literary journals, including *South Carolina Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Subtropics*, *Southwest Review*, and *Catamaran*. He is the author of the short story collection *The Middle Ground*, and the poetry collection *Wind Apples*.

Piotr Florczyk is a poet, translator, and critic. He teaches at UW-Seattle, and lives with his family in Los Angeles.

Matthew Gellman's first book, *Beforelight*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and selected by Tina Chang as the winner of BOA Editions Ltd.'s A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize. His chapbook, *Night Logic*, was the winner of Tupelo Press's 2021 Snowbound Chapbook Award. His poems have appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Indiana Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and elsewhere. He's currently a PhD candidate in literature and creative writing at the University of Southern California.

Kelly Gray is a writer living in the backwoods under very tall trees. Her writing can be found in *Cream City Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *ANMLY*, and other places. Gray is the recipient of the Neutrino Prize from *Passages North*, the ArtSurround Cohort Grant, and the *Tusculum Review* Chapbook Prize.

Emily Hall is a freelance writer with a PhD in English from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her work has appeared in *The Keepthings*, *The Autoethnographer*, and *Flying South*, where she was a finalist for their creative nonfiction contest. She lives in North Carolina with her husband.

K.A. Hays is the author of four books of poetry, most recently *Anthropocene Lullaby* (Carnegie Mellon, 2022) and a co-translated book of poems with Keith Waldrop, *Before Wisdom*: *The Early Poems of Paul Verlaine* (World Poetry Books, 2023). Hays' poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Best New Poets*, *Kenyon Review*, *Tin House*, and *American Poetry Review*, among others. Hays lives in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Alyssa Jewell lives in Grand Rapids, MI where she teaches ESL and creative writing classes. She is a PhD student at Western Michigan University and edits poetry for *Waxwing*. Her work has appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *Colorado Review*, *Poet Lore*, and elsewhere.

Jenny Johnson is the author of *In Full Velvet* (Sarabande Books, 2017). Her poems and essays appear in *American Poetry Review*, *BOMB*, and *The New York Times*. She is an assistant professor of creative writing at West Virginia University, and she is on the faculty of the Rainier Writing Workshop.

Luke Johnson is the author of *Quiver* (Texas Review Press, 2023), *A Slow Indwelling* (Harbor Editions 2024), and *Distributary* (Texas Review Press, 2025). *Quiver* was named one of four finalists for the 2024 California Book Award. You can find more of his work in *The Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere.

Lucas Jorgensen is a poet from Cleveland, Ohio. In 2023, he won the 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest. He has an MFA from New York University and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of North Texas. His work has appeared in *POETRY*, *LitHub*, *Copper Nickel*, and others.

Tobi Kassim was born in Ibadan, Nigeria, and immigrated to the United States in 2003. His poems have appeared in *The Volta*, *The Brooklyn Review*, Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Mercury Firs*, *The Chicago Review*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. Spiral Editions published his chapbook, *Dear Sly Stone*.

Vandana Khanna is the author of three collections of poetry. Her work has won the *Crab Orchard Review* First Book Prize, The Miller Williams Poetry Prize, and the Diode Editions Chapbook Competition. Her poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The New Republic*, Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day*, and *New England Review.*

Marin D. Killen is an ecogoth, ecofeminist, lesbian poet and graduate of Winthrop University, where she received her master's degree in literature. Her poems have been published in *Screen Door Review.* She can always be found reading horror novels, drinking black tea, and taking night walks in her neighborhood in South Carolina.

Ben Kline, a poet, library professional, and Madonna podcaster, is the author of *It Was Never Supposed to Be* (Variant Literature), *Twang* (ELJ Editions), and *Stiff Wrist* (fourteen poems). His work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Copper Nickel*, *Florida Review*, *West Trade Review*, and other publications. Learn more at https://linktr.ee/benkline.

Ellen Kombiyil's (she/her) latest poetry collection is *Love as Invasive Species*, published by Cornerstone Press (University of Wisconsin) in Fall 2024 as part of the Portage Poetry Series. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Pleiades*, and *Ploughshares*. A graduate of the University of Chicago and Hunter's MFA program, she currently teaches writing at Hunter College. Find her at www.ellenkombiyil.com.

Zack Lam, a student at Richard Montgomery High School, is a poet who likes John Coltrane and long walks around Washington, D.C. He has previously been recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. This is his first publication.

Jennifer LeBlanc earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. Her first book, *Descent*, was published by Finishing Line Press (2020) and named a Distinguished Favorite in Poetry (2021) by the Independent Press Award. Individual poems have been published in journals such as *Consequence*, *Solstice*, and *Nixes Mate Review*.

Michael Levan has work in recent or forthcoming issues of *Allium*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Lost Balloon*, and *Hippocampus Magazine*. He is an associate professor of English and lives in Fort Wayne, Indiana, with his wife, Molly, and children, Atticus, Dahlia, and Odette.

Steven Leyva was born in New Orleans, Louisiana and raised in Houston, Texas. He is the author of *The Understudy's Handbook*, which won the Jean Feldman Poetry Prize from Washington Writers Publishing House. His second book of poems, *The Opposite of Cruelty*, is forthcoming from Blair Publishing in Spring 2025.

Emily Light is a poet, educator, and mother living in northern New Jersey. Her poetry can be found in such journals as *Inch*, *Salt Hill*, *Terrain.org*, and *RHINO*, among others.

Alvin Lu's novel *Daydreamers* will be published in July 2025 by Fiction Collective 2. His website is alvinlu.co.

Jenny Maaketo (she/her) is a neurodivergent writer, an MFA poetry candidate at the University of Mississippi, and the senior poetry editor for *Yalobusha Review*. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *The Florida Review*, *PRISM international*, *Columbia Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *The Madison Review*, and elsewhere.

Santiago Márquez Ramos is a mental health therapist in NYC. Originally from Mexico, he's passionate about weaving culture and mental health into every story, as well as Spanish, his native language. He's been published in *DreamForge Magazine*, *Chestnut Review*, and *Latin@Literatures*. You can find his work and ADHD-fueled projects at santiagomarquezramos.com.

Kevin McLellan is the author of *Sky. Pond. Mouth* (2024 Granite State Poetry Prize), *in other words you/* (2022 Hilary Tham Capital Collection), *Ornitheology*, *Tributary*, *Round Trip*, and the book objects, *Hemispheres* and [*box*], which reside in several special collections including the Blue Star Collection at Harvard University.

Willy Palomo is author of *Wake the Others*, a winner of the Foreword Prize in Poetry 2024. He is the son of two refugees from El Salvador. Learn more at www.palomopoemas.com.

Donald Pasmore is a senior at Salisbury University who has poems published or forthcoming in *Permafrost*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Shore*, *The MacGuffin*, and more. In addition to being a student, he is the editor-in-chief of *Scarab Literary Magazine* and is an assistant editor of *Poet Lore*.

Carl Phillips is the author of 17 books of poetry, most recently *Scattered Snows, to the North* (2024) and *Then the War: And Selected Poems 2007-2020*, which won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize. His other honors include the Kingsley Tufts Award, a Lambda Literary Award, and the PEN/USA Award for Poetry. He lives on Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Michael Caleb Tasker was born in Montreal, Canada and spent his childhood in Montreal, New Orleans, and Buenos Aires. His fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. His short story collection *All Gone Now* is forthcoming from Cornerstone Press.

Julia Thacker's poems have appeared in *The Massachusetts Review*, *The New Republic*, and *Poetry International.* She has received fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and the NEA. Her collection, *To Wildness*, selected for the 19th Anthony Hecht Poetry Prize, will be published by Waywiser Press in 2025.

Amy Thatcher is a native of Philadelphia, where she works as a public librarian. Her poems have been published in *Guesthouse*, *Bear Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Rhino*, *SWWIM*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Palette Poetry*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Shore*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Anti-Heroin Chic*. Her work has been nominated for Best New Poets 2024, and is forthcoming in *The Journal*, *Denver Quarterly*, *SWWIM*, and *Harbor Review*.

Denise Tolan's work has been included in places such as *The Penn Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *The Best Small Fictions*. She has a memoir out in the world, *Italian Blood. Italian Blood* was a finalist for the 2023 Eric Hoffer Book Award. Find out more about Denise at denisetolan.com.

Ryan Varadi is a midwestern poet living in Chicago, where he writes on the train on the way to work. He teaches at *The Porch* and has served as staff for *Ecotone*, *Chautauqua*, and *RHINO Poetry*. His work appears in *Frontier Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *River Heron Review*, among others.

Julie Marie Wade writes and publishes poetry, prose, and hybrid forms, most recently *Fugue: An Aural History* (Diagram/New Michigan Press, 2023), *Otherwise: Essays* (Autumn House, 2023), and *The Mary Years* (Texas Review Press, 2024), selected by Michael Martone for the 2023 Clay Reynolds Novella Prize. Her book *Quick Change Artist: Poems* (Anhinga Press, 2025) was selected by Octavio Quintanilla for the 2023 Anhinga Prize in Poetry.

Caroline White is a current poetry editor for *storySouth* and a lecturer at UNCG. She received her MFA from UNC Greensboro where she served as editor for *The Greensboro Review.* Her work has been published in *Boulevard Magazine*, *Press 53, Slipstream*, and others.

Theodora Ziolkowski is the author of a Next Generation Indie Book Award-winning novella, *On the Rocks*, and a chapbook of short stories, *Mother Tongues*. Her poetry collection, *Ghostlit*, is forthcoming this spring. She's an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

about the cover artist

Alex Merritt is an American painter who lives and works in upstate New York. He received a BFA in painting from MICA and completed his MFA at the New York Academy of Art. Works from Merritt are in numerous private collections worldwide and recently he had a collection of works acquired by the Ilana Goor Museum in Tel Aviv, Israel. In 2018 the artist joined the former Booth Gallery, based in New York.

"Snow" is part of a new body of work, *Impermanence*, that explores the transient nature of existence. In these works, thick accretions of paint are a metaphor for the passing of time, changing seasons, and our changing memory and physicality. More like memories than digital snapshots, they seek to find the essence more than the appearance of things. The paint moves in and out of the frame like a living organism continuously changing. In these paintings, there is an attempt to signify something alive and changing, something impermanent.

about the literary shade artist

Stu Cawley is a transplanted Yankee who's come to love Chestertown, Maryland, his home of the past twenty years. His career trajectory has gone in less than linear fashion from teacher to reporter to ski bum/bellhop to agricultural technician to baker to housepainter/artist. He'd love to moor permanently in the second half of the latter and appreciates the always engaging illustration assignments the Literary House has afforded him.